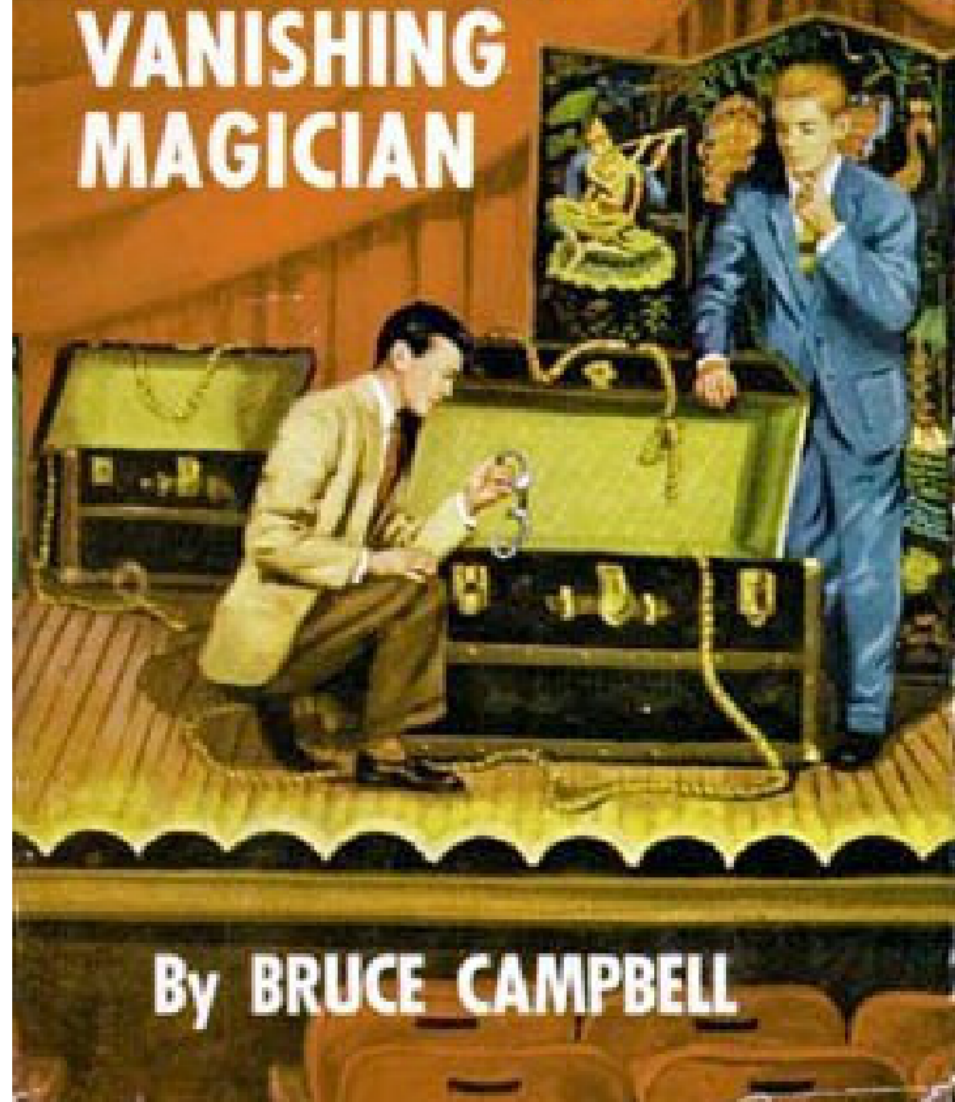


**A KEN HOLT Mystery**

# **THE MYSTERY OF THE VANISHING MAGICIAN**



**By BRUCE CAMPBELL**

THE MYSTERY OF THE VANISHING MAGICIAN  
A KEN HOLT Mystery, No. 12  
By Bruce Campbell

The KEN HOLT Mystery Stories

- 1 The Secret of Skeleton Island
- 2 The Riddle of the Stone Elephant
- 3 The Black Thumb Mystery
- 4 The Clue of the Marked Claw
- 5 The Clue of the Coiled Cobra
- 6 The Secret of Hangman's Inn
- 7 The Mystery of the Iron Box
- 8 The Clue of the Phantom Car
- 9 The Mystery of the Galloping Horse
- 10 The Mystery of the Green Flame
- 11 The Mystery of the Grinning Tiger
- 12 The Mystery of the Vanishing Magician
- 13 The Mystery of the Shattered Glass
- 14 The Mystery of the Invisible Enemy
- 15 The Mystery of Gallows Cliff
- 16 The Clue of the Silver Scorpion
- 17 The Mystery of the Plumed Serpent
- 18 The Mystery of the Sultan's Scimitar

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers*  
NEW YORK

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CONTENTS

# **CHAPTER**

## **I NOT ON THE PROGRAM**

**II IDENTIFIED**

**III THE LAW MOVES IN**

**IV THE EVIDENCE PILES UP**

**V A GRIM BEGINNING**

**VI CHRIS BELL'S STORY**

**VII PANIC**

**VIII SANDY'S SOLUTION**

**IX KEN'S THEORY**

**X KEN ADMITS DEFEAT**

**XI A NEW RAY OF HOPE**

**XII A TRAP IS BAITED**

**XIII A TRAP IS SPRUNG**

**XIV INTO THE MOUNTAIN**

**XV DOUBLE-CROSS**

**XVI BURIED ALIVE**

**XVII THE TRAIL OF SMOKE**

**XVIII THE TRICK THAT DIDN'T WORK**

# CHAPTER I

## NOT ON THE PROGRAM

On the stage of the Brentwood High School auditorium a slim young man in evening clothes, his waistcoat gleaming in the spotlight, deftly poked endless yards of red and white silk into a hollow cane. The auditorium was filled to capacity. Three thousand eyes were following every movement of the magician's hands.

The occupants of the three aisle seats in the fifth row of the center section towered a head above most of their neighbors. Their size and their red hair marked them as the Allen clan, owners of the town's weekly newspaper, the *Brentwood Advance*. Pop Allen sat in the aisle seat, and beside him sat his elder son, Bert, whose six-and-a-half-foot height matched his father's. Next to Bert was Sandy Allen, a few inches shorter than his brother but with shoulders as broad and hair that was even redder.

Mom Allen, whose tinyness was always more apparent when she appeared with her strapping family, sat up as straight as she could beside Sandy. The top of her hat came well below his shoulder.

At Mom's left was Ken Holt, who made his home with the Allens while his father, the famous Richard Holt, roamed the world as a foreign correspondent for the Global News Service.

Ken was shorter than Sandy. His hair was as black as Sandy's was red. But the wiry strength of his slender body had often proved as enduring and resilient as the brawnier power of Sandy's muscles. And at the moment he was performing a feat that Sandy always watched with admiration. He was looking steadily at the stage, and scribbling shorthand symbols at the same time on the sheaf of copy paper under his fingers. Pop had assigned Ken to cover the evening's event for the *Brentwood Advance*. Pop himself and the rest of the family were present chiefly because the performance was being given for the benefit of a new children's clinic at the Brentwood Hospital—a clinic for which the *Advance* had been agitating for months.

The last inch of red and white silk disappeared into the hollow cane and the magician put the walking stick down on a small table. In its place he picked up a nickel-plated revolver.

"Watch closely, please," he said. He lifted the revolver high above his head, aiming it at the ceiling, and pulled the trigger. The loud report reverberated through the auditorium. A cloud of red smoke

billowed out over the stage. As it cleared, the magician took up the walking stick again and began to pull from its tip yards and yards of cloth. But now the cloth was no longer red and white. It was green and yellow. The audience burst into applause as the brilliant stuff cascaded to the floor in a seemingly endless stream.

Sandy leaned across his mother, with a gesture toward Ken's flying pencil. "Relax," he murmured under cover of the hand clapping. "Global News isn't going to want this story, and you've already got enough for the *Advance*."

"Those pictures you took are probably no good, as usual," Ken retorted, "so I'm writing enough to fill up the space."

"Huh!" Sandy snorted. "If your stories were as good as my pictures, we'd really be quite a team."

They grinned at each other. Their good-natured bickering was a custom as old as their friendship—a friendship that had begun on the night Ken found a refuge in the *Advance* office from criminals determined to kidnap him. The adventure which began that night, and which came to be known as *The Secret of Skeleton Island*, was the first of many the two boys had shared since. That same night the partnership which now supplied Global News with many stories, told in Ken's vivid words and Sandy's skillful photographs, was formed.

The magician was bowing his thanks and relaxing into a smile that made his thin face look suddenly youthful, in spite of its theatrically traditional mustache and pointed goatee. Slowly, still bowing, he moved into the wings. The curtain fell.

"Isn't he remarkable!" Mom Allen exclaimed.

Sandy laughed. "Not remarkable when you know how, Mom. All he does is—"

Mom raised her small hand. "Don't tell me, Sandy. It's more fun not knowing."

Pop was getting to his feet. "Ten-minute intermission. Anyone want to join me outside?"

"Sure," Ken and Sandy said simultaneously, standing up.

Sandy waited for Bert to follow Pop out into the aisle, and when Bert remained in his seat, staring blankly at the curtain as if he were trying to see through it, Sandy gave his shoulder a nudge. "If you're still trying to figure out those tricks, come on outside and I'll explain them all to you."

"You boys coming, or aren't you?" Pop demanded.

"We're coming if my oversize brother ever lets us past," Sandy said, nudging Bert again.

This time Bert started, looked up at Sandy and then at his father, and got to his feet. "Sorry," he murmured, "I was trying to figure out—" He left the sentence unfinished as they emerged together into the

crowded aisle.

When Ken and Sandy and Bert were all grouped around Pop, in the least congested corner of the lobby, Sandy asked, "Which of the tricks bothers you, Bert? I know how that cane one works, and—"

"None of them," Bert said. "I've been trying to figure out—" Suddenly he interrupted himself as abruptly as he'd interrupted Sandy, and the frown on his face cleared into a wide grin. "I've got it! All evening I've been thinking this magician—what's his name? Magnus?—reminded me of somebody I know, and I've just realized who it is. Chris Bell! In fact, I think he is Chris."

"Chris Bell?" Ken repeated the name on a questioning note. He'd lived with the Allens long enough now to know all their friends, and his work for the *Advance* had made him familiar with most people in Brentwood, but he'd never heard of a Chris Bell before. He looked at Sandy to see if he was in the dark too, but Sandy, like Pop, was regarding Bert with pleased astonishment.

"Really!" Sandy exclaimed. "But you never told us he was a magician."

"He wasn't then," Bert told him. "He worked in a store—a jewelry store, I think it was."

"You think this Magnus fellow is Bell?" Pop asked.

"I could almost swear it," Bert said. "Of course with that mustache and goatee it's hard to tell, but when he smiled there at the end I knew he was somebody familiar."

"But who is Chris Bell?" Ken demanded.

"You've heard about him, Ken," Sandy answered. "He saved Bert's life five years ago in Vermont!"

"Oh! Of course!"

Ken had heard the story a dozen times, although the event itself had occurred before he knew the Allen family.

Bert had gone to Vermont on a skiing trip with several friends, but when they had all refused to join him in an attempt on the longest and most difficult slope in the area, he had unwisely decided to try it alone. Halfway down the steep, wooded incline, at a point miles from the nearest habitation, his ski had caught on a snow-covered rock. The next thing he knew he was trying to struggle to his feet and discovering that his right ankle was broken.

The day was bitter cold. Bert's shouts for help had gone unanswered. He had tried to keep in motion, to prevent himself from freezing, but after crawling on his hands and knees for what seemed like hours he had lost consciousness again. That time, when he came to, he was in a small cabin and a strange young man was building a blazing fire on the hearth. Night had fallen by then. Bert realized afterward that it must have taken his rescuer hours to carry him to the

shelter-but the stranger set off for help as soon as he had given Bert a hot drink and a sedative from his first-aid kit. At midnight the young man was back with a doctor, and he spent the next two days looking after Bert until a jeep-borne stretcher could be brought close enough to the cabin to take the patient to a hospital. Bert had never seen his rescuer again. The young man's name had been Chris Bell.

Afterward, Ken remembered, Bert had made innumerable efforts to trace Bell, but there had been very little to go on. Because Bert had been so weak from shock and exposure that he slept most of the time, he had talked very little with the man. He didn't learn whether Bell was also vacationing in Vermont, or whether he lived there. Efforts to trace him through the doctor had been futile; the doctor too had learned nothing but Bell's name. Bert had sent letters addressed to Bell to all the inns and towns near the scene of his accident, but they had all been returned marked *Addressee Unknown*. The fact that Bell worked in a jewelry store-the one thing Bert could recall the young man having said about himself-had proved useless as a clue for tracing him. After a year Bert had given up the fruitless search. But the Allen family had never forgotten the young man who saved Bert's life, and who disappeared so self-effacingly afterward, and they had always hoped to locate him some day and thank him properly for what he had done.

No wonder, Ken thought, that Bert-and Pop Allen and Sandy too-were excited about the possibility that Chris Bell had been found at last.

"Go backstage as soon as the show is over and talk to him," Pop was saying. "And if he is Bell, try and bring him up to the house."

"Sure. I will," Bert agreed.

"Of course he may be so ashamed of having saved your worthless life that he'll deny ever having seen you before," Sandy remarked, grinning.

"Hi, folks!" A powerful hand gripped Pop's elbow and they all turned to see Andy Kane, Brentwood's police chief, resplendent in his dress uniform. "Don't forget to write a good description of the last trick in the *Advance*," Kane went on. "As usual, I'll have to miss the final few minutes of the show if I expect to get that tangle of cars out of the parking lot before dawn, though I've put two extra men on here tonight to help handle the traffic. Great crowd, isn't it?" Suddenly he seemed to realize that he had interrupted a family conclave of some sort. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't realize you folks were talking business-or whatever it is."

"It's not business," Sandy assured him. "Bert thinks he knows Magnus, and I've been telling him Magnus probably won't admit it even if it's true."

“Hmm?” Kane looked puzzled.

But the lobby lights had already begun to flash on and off, to indicate the end of the intermission, and Kane got separated from them in the crowd as they all started back toward their seats.

Ken and Sandy had barely squeezed down into their places when the curtain went up.

The stage was now bare except for the small table, two large trunks standing near the backdrop, and several folding screens. A moment later Magnus appeared. He bowed to the applause that greeted him, and then motioned his assistant onto the stage to share it. The applause increased and a ripple of amusement went through the crowd.

The assistant was a Brentwood High School student, Don Beacon, selected by Magnus that afternoon from among half a dozen amateur magicians eager to serve with the professional performer. Ken had interviewed Don earlier that evening, but the boy had been too excited over his good luck to say much. “Boy, am I lucky!” he’d repeated several times, as if unable to find any other words. Then, in a single burst of confidence, he’d added, “Magnus is a great guy. He showed all of us how to do some of his tricks. But I’m the only one who’ll know the secret of the big finale—the magic trunk transfer!”

Ken, looking up at Don Beacon now, could see that the boy was still happily dazed. With a gaze of worshipful admiration, the round eyes in his serious face followed every motion Magnus made.

Magnus held up his hand for silence and stepped to the front of the stage. “For my last act, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “I will try to perform the old magical escape-and-transfer feat, similar to the one made famous by the great Houdini. I will be handcuffed, and then locked and roped inside one of these trunks. I will then magically transfer myself to the other roped and locked trunk.” His rare smile flashed briefly. “Are we ready, Don?”

“Yes, sir.” Stiffly Don held out lengths of heavy rope and two pair of handcuffs.

“Good.” Magnus turned back to the audience. “Then I would like to request a committee of volunteers from the audience to step up onto the stage to assist me, and to make sure that no—” he smiled once more—“that no tricks are used in my performance. I would like about a dozen volunteers, please.”

Bert rose instantly to his feet. “I’m going up.”

His mother jerked around in her seat to stare at him. Bert hated public appearances.

“He wants to get a closer look at Magnus,” Sandy whispered to her. “He thinks he’s Chris Bell.”

“Chris Bell! The young man who-?”



"That's right," Sandy assured her. "The one who saved Bert's life."

"My goodness!" Mom craned her neck to get a better view of the magician, now speaking quietly to the various members of the audience who were rather sheepishly joining him on the platform.

When ten volunteers had appeared, Magnus said, "That's fine. Now we'll get started. First, gentlemen, I want you to examine both of these trunks carefully." He waited until they had lifted both lids, peered inside, and rapped the trunk walls to test for loose panels. "Are they just what they appear to be—solidly constructed trunks?" he asked them.

"Look like it," one man said. The others nodded.

"Very well. We're ready for the handcuffs, then."

Don Beacon sprang forward at his gesture and handed Magnus the two pairs of cuffs. Magnus turned them over immediately to the volunteer standing closest to him. "Fasten one pair around my wrists," he said, clasping his hands together behind his back, "and the other pair around my ankles."

Ken and the Allen family watched intently while Bert stepped closer to the performer, held out his hand for a pair of the cuffs, and deftly fastened them around the man's ankles. When Bert straightened up again he seemed to be saying something to the magician, although his voice was pitched too low to carry over the footlights.

For an instant Magnus raised his head sharply to look up into Bert's face, several inches above his own. Ken and the Allens instinctively leaned forward, watching him. Then Magnus smiled slightly, spoke an inaudible word or two, and raised his voice to its usual level. "Thank you, gentlemen," he said. "And now will you please lower me into that trunk"—he glanced toward the one on the right of the stage—"and lock me inside. One of you gentlemen will please keep the key. Afterward, you will use the ropes my assistant has ready for you, to tie up the trunk. In the meantime, sir, will you—and you"—he indicated a doctor and a lawyer among the volunteers—"lock and tie up the other trunk?"

A hush came over the audience as Magnus was lifted up and lowered into one of the trunks. Quietly and efficiently the volunteers carried out the rest of his instructions, while Don Beacon stood by handing out the lengths of rope one by one. Only Bert seemed to take no active part in the procedure. He had stepped back slightly away from the others. His face wore a curious, puzzled expression.

When both trunks were securely locked and bound, young Don Beacon cleared his throat and swallowed twice. Then, loudly, he spoke the lines he had learned only a few hours before. Turning toward the screens at one side of the stage, he said, "Now we will place screens in front of the trunks. Within three minutes Magnus will transfer himself

from one trunk to the other.”

Willing hands lifted the screens and spread them out, in an overlapping row, so that they entirely hid the two trunks from the audience’s view. “The committee will please remain on the stage,” Don Beacon said. The boy already had his watch in his hand. The moment the screens were in place he said loudly, “Now!” and from then on eyed his watch intently. “Fifteen seconds!” he announced after an interval. And then, “Thirty seconds!”

Many members of the audience were also watching the second hands of their own timepieces sweep around. Somewhere backstage a stirring march had begun to play, and the music filled the big room over its public-address system. But above the sound of the music Don Beacon’s voice could still be heard.

“One minute! ... One minute and fifteen seconds! ... One minute and thirty seconds! ...”

Bert was scarcely visible, standing behind several other volunteers. Only the top of his red head could be seen from the row where Ken and the Allens sat.

Mom Allen murmured, “It’s downright spooky!”

“Two minutes and forty-five seconds!”

And then, at last, “Three minutes!” The music stopped with a triumphant burst. “Gentlemen,” the young assistant added, in a tone that attempted to imitate Magnus’s own suave manner, “will you please remove the screens, then untie and unlock the trunk into which you placed Magnus.”

Quickly the screens were folded and placed against a side wall. Again the volunteers gathered around the trunk. A local butcher, who had retained the key, stepped forward and turned it in the lock. Hands fumbled to untie the knots they had tied several minutes before.

Every head in the audience lifted as the trunk lid was raised.

“Empty!” one of the volunteers said in a loud voice, as if he really had not believed until that moment that Magnus could remove himself from the locked and bound trunk.

The others laughed self-consciously.

“Yes,” Don Beacon said proudly, “the trunk is now empty! Will you tilt it forward, gentlemen, so that the audience can see inside?”

They did as he requested. Somewhere in the balcony a small boy’s voice piped up. “But, Daddy, what happened to the man they put in there?”

Laughter exploded in little bursts throughout the auditorium.

“I don’t care if it is a trick,” Mom Allen was saying. “It’s uncanny—that’s what it is!” She broke off as Don, with a flourish, invited the volunteers to open the second trunk.

The doctor supplied the key from his pocket. The lawyer opened

the lock. Half a dozen pairs of hands worked at the ropes and tossed them aside, one after the other. One of the members of the audience committee was the high school principal, and Don Beacon addressed him when the trunk was finally unbound. "Will you open the lid, sir?"

The principal grinned, stepped forward, and with a quick thrust pulled the lid upward. Then he stood frozen, staring down into it. Swiftly the other volunteers gathered around.

The audience had already begun to applaud as the lid went up. Slowly the applause died. "What's happened?" somebody called out.

The principal turned toward the crowd. He was attempting a grin. "This one's empty too!" he announced. Swiftly he tilted the trunk forward so that all could see its interior.

Startled gasps filled the room.

"What's happened to Magnus, Don?" the principal asked. "Or aren't you supposed to tell us that? Is he going to fly out of the wings now, or-" He stopped and moved quickly toward Don Beacon.

The boy was as white as a sheet. "I don't know," he said, in a frightened whisper that carried through the crowded auditorium. "He's supposed to be in there! He's not supposed to vanish!"

## CHAPTER II

### IDENTIFIED

The volunteers on the stage moved a step closer to young Don Beacon and then stopped, as if hearing again the boy's whispered words, "He's not supposed to vanish!" All the men looked awkward and ill at ease, uncertain what to do.

Suddenly one of Don Beacon's classmates called out loudly from the audience, "You sure learn fast, Don! Most magicians can only make rabbits disappear!"

A wave of nervous laughter swept through the audience and died as swiftly as it had started. The school principal had been talking earnestly to Don Beacon, in a low voice, and now he took the boy's arm and they moved together off the stage. A commanding gesture from the principal told the rest of the volunteer committee to remain where they were. The men looked at each other, glanced out at the audience, and then drew together into an awkward little group. In the midst of it, Ken and Sandy could see Bert's head raised above the rest.

"Sandy," Mom said quietly, "this time I'll let you tell me. How could that young man disappear right off the stage?"

"I don't know what's happened, Mom," Sandy admitted. "Maybe—"

He broke off as the principal reappeared and raised his hand. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said quietly, "Magnus has been taken suddenly ill. He didn't vanish completely just to entertain us. He got out of the first trunk all right and then—according to our good friend, Ben Howe, the school maintenance supervisor, who's been operating the record player backstage—he realized he was unable to go on." Once more the principal raised his hand to still the buzz of comment that rose up in the crowded hall. "But I know that none of us feels Magnus cheated us of a full evening's entertainment, so I suggest we show our appreciation of his performance with a round of applause, even if the artist isn't on hand to hear it."

There was another buzz of comment as the audience applauded, but the clapping was hearty. It rose to a crescendo when the principal beckoned Don Beacon back on stage from the wings, and the boy, still pale, took an awkward bow. Then, suddenly, all over the hall, people were standing up and making their way into the aisles. The hospital clinic benefit was over.

Ken and the Allens rose to their feet, but they remained where they were. The two boys looked questioningly at Pop. Bert was still on the platform, talking to Don Beacon and the school principal.

Mom Allen was the first to speak. "Albert," she said to her husband

decisively, "if that young magician is sick, and if he's Chris Bell-even if he isn't Chris Bell, for that matter-I think we ought to look after him."

Pop grinned at her. "I knew just what you were going to say, Mom. Don't worry. We'll find out about him. After all, when a magician vanishes, that's news. And when anyone is sick, the Allen home for stray cats, dogs, and other inmates goes into operation-which isn't news. Go ahead, you two," he told Ken and Sandy. "Talk to Bert and find out what he knows. And remember, the *Advance* wants the story, and Mom wants the patient, if he's willing to be looked after by the best nurse this side of the Rockies. In the meantime, I'll take Mom home, and maybe have a bite to eat before I go back to the office. You can report to us there."

"I baked a pie," Mom said. Somehow, Mom always baked a pie on the night before publication day, when all her menfolk worked late and wanted an evening snack. The *Advance* was due out the following afternoon.

Ken and Sandy executed identical salutes, and while Pop and Mom joined the last stragglers heading for the outer doors, the boys made their way in the opposite direction toward the platform.

The majority of the volunteer committee members were leaving the stage, coming down the short flight of steps to the auditorium floor from the left side of the stage. Ken and Sandy hurried up the right-hand flight and joined Bert, Don Beacon, and the school principal, already in a huddle with Ben Howe in the wings.

"It was like I told you before," Ben Howe was saying, his face wrinkled with concern under the battered cap he always wore. "He crawled out from under the curtain right over there"-his pointing finger indicated a spot behind the trunk in which Magnus had been locked by the committee-"and got up and came right over to me. I was standing by the record player. He said he was too sick to finish his act-and he did look sick, I'll tell you that. 'Please apologize for me,' he said, in a kind of shaky voice. 'Tell the boy not to worry about my props,' he said. I'll pick them up later.' He had his handcuffs off by then. Gave 'em to me to put with the rest of his stuff. Then he went straight out that back door into the parking lot. I'd have gone after him to see if he needed help, but I figured he wanted me to stay here to give his message."

"Yes, yes, Ben. You did quite right," the principal said. "But I wonder where he could have gone."

"Maybe he went out to lie down in his trailer," Don Beacon offered. "He travels in one, you know -lives in it."

"Let's go look," Bert said decisively, and led the way.

The parking lot was nearly empty now. Except for the principal's own car, Ben Howe's mud-stained pickup truck, and the boys'

gleaming red convertible, it held nothing but a small trailer bearing the neatly painted words *Magnus the Magician*. All of them hurried over to it.

It looked dark and deserted. Its door was locked, and there was no answer when Bert knocked, first gently and then more loudly.

"The car that pulls the trailer isn't here," Ken pointed out. "Maybe he went off in that."

"But why should he?" Don Beacon wondered. "If he was sick, why would he drive off anywhere?"

"I don't know, Don," the principal said. He looked suddenly tired. "And I suppose it's really none of our business. He gave us a good performance. He knows his properties will be safe in the school until he wants them. So I suggest that there's nothing more we can do right now. Ben wants to lock up. I suggest we leave him to it. I'll take you home, Don." He turned to Bert and the boys. "I assume you have your own car?"

"Yes, sir, right over there." Ken glanced at Sandy, saw the redhead about to open his mouth, and took him firmly by the arm. Ken had caught the look that Bert sent Sandy and himself-the look that said, "Let it go. Drop it. And don't bring up the Chris Bell angle."

A moment later they were separating. The principal led a reluctant Don Beacon off to his own car, and Bert motioned the two boys to follow him toward their convertible.

"Mom and Pop gone on home?" Bert asked in a low voice when the others were out of earshot.

"Yes," Sandy told him. "But, Bert, what do you think happened? And is he Chris Bell? What did he say when you spoke to him?"

"Did you ask him outright if he was Bell?" Ken asked.

"Yes." Bert's voice had a curious underlying note of concern. "That is, I said, 'You are Chris Bell, aren't you? We've been looking for you for years.' He seemed so startled that I was sure he was going to say yes."

"But he didn't?" Sandy prompted.

"He said 'Great guns, no!'"

"Well, what do you know!" Sandy muttered. "Mom is certainly going to be disappointed -cheated out of a patient and a hero all in one evening."

But Ken had noticed the curious way in which Bert repeated the magician's words. "You still think he is Chris Bell, don't you?" he asked.

"I'm sure of it," Bert replied slowly.

"What?" Sandy was staring.

"One of the few things I remember about those two days when he was looking after me," Bert explained quietly, "is that I'd occasionally

rouse enough to realize that he was doing a great deal for a complete stranger. So I'd try to say something about it, to tell him how much I appreciated it. He always answered with 'Great guns, this is nothing!' or 'Great guns, don't worry about it!'"

"Great guns!" Sandy echoed quietly. "Then he is Chris Bell!" He had his hand on the door of the convertible, but he was too intent on what Bert had just said to open it and get inside.

"I'm sure he is," Bert agreed slowly. "But I can't figure out why he wouldn't admit it."

A car swung around the corner, from the direction of the front of the school, at an angle that illuminated them briefly for a moment. Then brakes screeched and the car came to a halt at the curb edging the parking lot.

"Bert! Is that you, Bert Allen?" Andy Kane's voice cut through the quiet night.

"Yes!" Bert called back.

The police chief was gesturing, and Bert and the boys instinctively trotted toward him.

"Glad I saw you," Kane said, when they came up beside his car. "You were saying something during the intermission about knowing this Magnus fellow, weren't you?"

Sandy answered him after a moment's silence. "It was I, Chief," he said. "I was saying Bert thought he knew Magnus."

"Well, do you?" Kane demanded sharply.

"Why do you ask?" Bert wanted to know.

"Because I thought if you knew him you'd want to hear about his accident, that's why."

"Accident!" Bert, Ken, and Sandy all repeated the word simultaneously.

"When? Where?" Bert hurried on. "Is he badly hurt?"

"Don't know much about it yet," Kane admitted. "Just got a report on my car radio. Happened at the traffic circle on Route 9. Car a total wreck, they told me-ran head on into a truck coming in from the crossroad. They've taken Magnus to the hospital. I'm going up there now. But first tell me-what's this I heard about him not finishing his last stunt?"

"We can talk at the hospital. We'll be right behind you," Bert told him, and swung around to start back toward the boys' car.

Normally, Bert was meticulous about not driving the boys' convertible without their express permission, but now he got in behind the wheel and had the engine roaring before Ken and Sandy were beside him. Ken was still pulling the door shut when Bert backed the car around and headed for the street.

None of them spoke during the three minutes it took Bert to reach

the hospital. A moment later they were inside. Kane was already there, in earnest conversation over the telephone at the reception desk. He nodded to them soberly. Impatiently they waited for him to finish.

"I see, Doc. Thanks. I'll keep in touch." Kane put down the phone. "Pretty bad," he told them. "Doc Tasker says his left leg is fractured in two places, and several ribs seem to be broken. There's also the chance of a punctured lung and a serious head injury. Doc's got him in the X-ray room now-still unconscious, of course." He motioned them away from the desk. "And now suppose you tell me what you know about this-let's see-what's his real name?" Kane fished for his notebook and thumbed through it. "Yes, here it is. This Edmond Albert."

"Edmond Albert?" Bert echoed blankly.

"Is *that* his name?" Ken asked.

"That's what his driving license said." Kane looked puzzled. "You mean you didn't know his name? But I thought--"

Sandy jumped in. "Looks like Bert was wrong after all. He thought Magnus was a fellow named Chris Bell-a fellow who saved Bert's life in Vermont, when Bert broke his ankle skiing and would have frozen to death if he hadn't had help."

"So that's why you went up on the platform." Kane grinned briefly. "I wondered what had come over you all of a sudden. You usually avoid a stage as if you were afraid it would give you measles." His eyes narrowed. "But didn't I see you speak to the fellow, just before I left the auditorium? What were you doing-asking him if he was this fellow you thought he was?"

"That's right," Bert admitted. "And he denied it. But I'm still sure he's Chris Bell just the same. And if he is, I want it understood that the Allens are responsible for seeing that he gets the best care available."

"Chris Bell, you say? That's what you think his name is? Sounds familiar, somehow." Kane rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You mean it rings a bell?" Sandy asked.

Kane and Bert both glared at him.

"When you start punning, Sandy," the chief told him, "it's time to break it up. We might as well, anyway," he went on. "Doc Tasker won't be able to tell us anything more tonight, he says. And he doesn't expect the poor chap to be conscious for hours, so there's no use our waiting around here in the hope of questioning him. Just tell me one thing, Bert. What did you know about this Chris Bell?"

"Practically nothing." Bert explained briefly about his encounter with the young man, and his fruitless efforts to trace him. "What makes you think the name sounds familiar to you?" he concluded. "Is it just that you've heard us talk about him at some time or other?"



Kane shook his head. "I don't think so. Don't ever recall hearing the name from you. It seems to me I've seen it printed somewhere, though. But if this chap is Chris Bell, why wouldn't he admit it to you?"

On that puzzled note they separated from the police chief until morning, when they hoped to be able to learn more about the magician's condition and his identity. "But I'm going to call the hospital in an hour or so," Bert muttered as they slid into the convertible.

Fifteen minutes later, seated around the kitchen table with Mom and Pop, Bert went over the events of the evening once more, and suddenly Pop was repeating Kane's last words.

"But if this chap is Chris Bell, why wouldn't he admit it to you? he asked.

"And why do you suppose the poor thing rushed off in his car like that?" Mom added. "It couldn't have been anything you said to him, Bert, could it?"

"I don't see how," Bert answered. "All I said was" -he stopped to think for a moment-"something like 'You are Chris Bell, aren't you? We've been looking for you for a long time.'"

Pop smiled. "That doesn't sound very frightening. Of course, Bert," he went on, " 'Great guns!' isn't a very unusual expression. Almost anybody might use it. I don't think it necessarily means that this chap is Bell. And people *do* look alike. Maybe you're-

The telephone rang. Bert, nearest to the kitchen extension, picked it up. "Bert Allen speaking... . Hi, Andy. Any news from the hospital?"

During the next few moments, as Bert listened to the voice on the other end of the line, his jaw tightened and the color drained out of his face.

Ken and Sandy exchanged worried glances. Bert, usually so calm, looked shocked, as if trying hard to control his feelings.

"It's not possible!" Bert exploded finally into the phone. "I just don't believe it! ... But I tell you ... O.K., Andy. I'll see you in the morning." His hand was shaking as he put the phone down.

"For Pete's sake, what happened?" Sandy demanded.

Bert answered in a voice that startled them all with its bitterness. "Andy kept puzzling over that name, so he went to his office and checked his *Wanted* file. He found a Christopher Bell in it. It seems he's wanted for complicity in robbing a jewelry store in Hilldale, Pennsylvania-the store he worked in." Bert's fist came down on the table so furiously that milk sloshed in the glasses and the half-eaten pieces of Mom's pie, forgotten now, nearly bounced off their plates.

"No wonder he ran off!" Bert barked. "He probably thought I wanted to turn him in. And that's how I repay the man who saved my

life! I drive him into a crack-up, and if he lives, he'll go to jail!"

## CHAPTER III

### THE LAW MOVES IN

“Don’t be a chump!” Sandy’s words burst loudly into the silence that followed Bert’s angry self-accusation. “You didn’t cause his accident! You didn’t make him a fugitive from justice! What are you blaming yourself for?”

Ordinarily, Sandy liked nothing better than to out-score verbally his big brother, but when Bert was in trouble, he was the first to rush to his defense.

“Sandy’s right, Bert,” Ken put in. “It’s not your fault that-“

“Oh, cut it out, you two,” Bert said.

“Now all of you stop it right this minute!” Mom’s quiet voice had an edge to it. “Bert, you did no more than anyone would have done in a similar situation. But instead of all of you wasting time arguing about it, why don’t you try to find out exactly what it is Mr. Bell is supposed to have done? You want to help him, don’t you? Even if he’s guilty of-“

“But he couldn’t be guilty,” Bert protested.

“You’re talking like a child, Bert,” Pop told him coldly. “You don’t know anything about what’s supposed to have happened in Hilldale. You don’t even know anything about Chris Bell, except what you could learn during two days when you yourself were largely unconscious.”

“Albert!” Mom protested, shocked. “Mr. Bell saved Bert’s life!”

“I know-I know,” Pop said. “But after all there are examples in history of men who were knaves on some occasions, and heroes on others. The villain with the heart of gold-” He broke off abruptly. “I know, Bert,” he said, more gently, “you have some acquaintance with Chris Bell. I have none. So I shouldn’t try to interpret him to you. But one more thing I do want to add. You still aren’t sure that Magnus and Chris Bell are the same person.”

“Yes, I am, Pop. As sure as I’d be that you are you, even if you were wearing a mustache and a goatee. The tone of his voice when he said ‘Great guns!’-I’m sure Magnus is Bell, all right.”

“That’s that, then. We’ll accept that as our working hypothesis,” Pop said conclusively. “But I don’t think you’re going at this thing with your customary intelligence when you make a positive statement about Bell’s innocence without facts to base it on.”

Ken leaned forward. “What would be the best way of getting the facts, Pop? If Bell is still wanted for complicity on this burglary charge, that means he hasn’t been tried yet, doesn’t it?”

"It does," Pop answered. "And it's also true-if that's what you're about to remind me of-that every accused person is presumed innocent until he's proved guilty."

"It seems to me," Mom put in briskly, "that what we ought to do first is make arrangements for our lawyer to represent Mr. Bell, and then all of us get together to find out exactly what happened."

Bert gave her a grateful glance, and Pop said,

"You're right, Mom. I'll get our lawyer on the phone first thing in the morning. In the meantime, I'll go down to the office now and put through a call to the Hilldale newspaper-if there is one-and see what I can find out through that channel. This is one of those times when I wish the *Advance* were a daily and not a weekly," he added. "Then we'd have carried the robbery story ourselves when it happened, and we'd have known about the case against Bell."

He turned toward Bert. "But since we have to start from scratch on this, I'd suggest that you high-tail it over to the police department. Andy Kane's probably getting in touch with the Hilldale police, and maybe he knows more about the case by now. You two," he told Sandy and Ken, "can join me at the office as soon as you eat that pie Mom cut for you."

He heaved himself to his feet. "How's that, Mom? Enough action to suit you?"

She smiled up at him. "It's a fair beginning."

"Women!" Pop snorted. "Never satisfied." He glared down at Bert. "Why aren't you on your way?"

Bert grinned at him crookedly. "I am-practically. I just realized I needed a little sustenance too." He was swallowing a huge bite of pie as he spoke, and he no longer looked quite so pale. "I'll check in at the office later," he added as Pop left the room.

Ken and Sandy were at the *Advance* within fifteen minutes. Pop was at his desk, telephone clamped to his ear, scrawling notes with a thick black copy pencil. "Yep-got that... . Right. ... Go ahead," he muttered at intervals. The only thing the boys learned from the one-sided conversation was that Pop and some representative of the Hilldale paper had readily established the kind of understanding that springs up so easily between newspapermen.

"Sure," Pop said finally. "Til have a copy in the mail for you tonight... . No, no pictures since the accident. He's too banged up for anybody to see him. But I'll send along a couple taken in connection with his performance here tonight. And you'll put those file copies in the mail for me right away, won't you? ... Right. We'll look for them in the morning. Thanks-good night." He dropped the instrument back in its cradle and reached for his pipe.

"Well?" Sandy prodded after a moment. "What did you find out?"

Pop puffed the pipe into life before he answered. "I got only a sketchy report, but it doesn't look too good." He puffed once more and then began to rattle off the material recorded in his notes. "Bell's an orphan. Came to Hilldale after finishing high school and got a job helping out in the town's only jewelry store. Did well. Promoted from general handyman to clerk, and then to a sort of junior executive. Four years ago, when the robbery took place, he'd been working there about nine years altogether."

"How big a store is this, Pop?" Ken wanted to know. "You wouldn't think a jewelry store in a small town would have so many employees that one of them could be called a junior executive."

Pop shrugged. "Can't answer that. But Jackson-editor of the Hilldale *Herald*-says the town is a shopping center for a big farming area and that the store does a sizable business. Anyway, the robbery took place a few weeks before Christmas, when the store was heavily stocked with watches and jewelry for the gift trade. The two men arrested for it are the ones who implicated Bell."

Sandy shook his head. "You're right. It doesn't look very good. What happened to those two?"

"Convicted and sent to the state penitentiary."

"And Bell got away?" Ken asked.

"Disappeared completely. But I'm getting ahead of the story." Pop straightened up in his chair. "Bell had a key to the front door of the store and knew the combination of the vault. The two convicted men say Bell's part in the theft was to open the store, cut off the burglar alarm, and open the vault. Then Bell was supposed to leave while they emptied the vault, and they all planned to meet later to divide the loot. What actually happened was-the men said-that Bell opened the door all right, but that the burglar alarm went off right after they entered the store. The two men ran for it, were nabbed by a cruising police car, and were so mad at Bell that they told the police about his part in the intended robbery immediately. The police instituted a search for Bell within a matter of minutes, but they couldn't find him. He'd simply disappeared. For complete details," Pop concluded, "see the Hilldale *Heralds* which should reach here tomorrow morning."

"But didn't the police-?" Ken began.

"I've told you all I know," Pop interrupted. "All I asked for was a bare outline of the case, so we could get a general idea of how things look for Bell. And in return for the *Heralds* Jackson is sending us, I promised him a copy of our story on what happened tonight. You write it now, Ken. Sandy, you print up a few pictures to send with the story."

"O.K., Pop." Sandy headed for the darkroom located in the basement.

“Remember, Ken,” Pop said, as Ken pulled paper out of a desk drawer, “there is no positive identification yet of Magnus the Magician as Chris Bell. We won’t have that until he becomes conscious and admits he’s Bell—or until someone from Hilldale arrives here to identify him. So watch out for libel. Right now, Magnus is still a man *believed* to be Christopher Bell of Hilldale, Pennsylvania.”

“Right, Pop.” Ken inserted carbon between two sheets of paper, to make an extra copy of his story for Pop’s informant in Hilldale, and a moment later the machine was rattling under his fingers.

Ken was pulling the last sheet out of his typewriter, and the hands of the office clock stood at one minute before midnight, when the front door opened and Bert walked in. Almost as if they were all following a playwright’s stage directions, Sandy came in from his darkroom at the same instant. As he laid four still-damp prints on Pop’s desk, Sandy looked at his older brother’s grim face and asked, “Is there any news from the hospital?”

Bert nodded. “He’s out of the operating room. Doc Tasker says he’s in better shape than he’d expected. Three ribs broken, but the lungs are all right and there doesn’t seem to be any serious concussion.”

“Is he conscious?” Pop inquired.

Bert shook his head. “Won’t be for several hours yet, Doc says. They’ve got him in a private room, with his broken leg in traction and a policeman sitting outside the door.” Bert grinned sourly. “As if the poor guy could run off under the circumstances!” Then he slumped down in the chair behind his own desk and ran a hand through his rumpled red hair. “Andy called the Hilldale Police Department and got a quick run-through of the whole story.”

“I got some of it myself,” Pop told him. “From the Hilldale *Herald* editor.”

Bert met his eyes. “Then you know how bad it looks.”

“But maybe when you hear Bell’s own side of the story—” Ken began.

“What can he say that will do him any good—after he ran off from the scene of the crime?” Bert interrupted.

“So now you think he’s guilty?” Pop asked.

“No, I don’t!” Bert snapped. “I’m just putting into words what everybody will be thinking, no matter what Bell himself says.” He jabbed a pencil into his desk and the point snapped off with a tiny sharp report. “Nobody can convince me,” Bert went on, “that a man who stole nearly two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of jewelry only four years ago would be traveling around the country earning a precarious living as a professional magician. If Bell—”

“Wait a minute!” Sandy broke in. “Did you say two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of jewelry? We didn’t know he got anything!”

Bert looked questioningly at his father. "Thought you heard the story from the Hilldale newspaper?"

"Only the outline, and apparently not all of that." Briefly, then, Pop roughed out for Bert what he had learned. "I guess Jackson just took for granted I already knew about the theft itself," he concluded. "What else did you find out?"

"Not much more," Bert admitted, "except for some details about the night it all happened. The man Andy talked to at the Hilldale police headquarters happened to be one of the two in the squad car that responded to the jewelry-store's burglar alarm. His version of it goes like this."

Bert tilted far back in his chair and rattled off his next words in a monotone that revealed his attempt to be completely objective.

"The squad car was cruising on its regular beat when the alarm sounded. The two cops heard it, speeded up along Hilldale's Main Street, and came within sight of the store only a couple of minutes after the alarm had started. They were slowing down in front of the store-they could already see that the shop door was standing wide open-when they saw two men streaking away up the street. So instead of stopping at the store they went after the men, assuming them to be thieves who had set off the alarm in an attempt to rob the store. The car caught up with them easily enough-the cops learned afterward the men had been heading for their own car -and pulled up beside them.

"The thieves, Chet Rogers and Pete Wright, tried to draw guns. There was a struggle, but the thieves were eventually disarmed and subdued-partly, I gather, because they were so furious at each other that they weren't putting up a good fight. One of them kept yelling, 'I told you that guy Bell couldn't be trusted!' A moment later, while the cops were clapping on the handcuffs, a man named James Turney came tearing along the street. He's the store's oldest employee-he lived only two blocks from the store-and he'd been awakened by the sound of the alarm bell. He had dashed out in his pajamas, waving a revolver. He was all set to help the cops, but as soon as he realized they had things under control, he ran on toward the store, to check on things there. The police tried to stop him, saying they were afraid there had been a third man on the job, but Turney insisted he could handle a single man and kept on going. As soon as the cops had Rogers and Wright in the squad car, safely handcuffed, they drove straight back to the store. Turney had already turned on all the lights, and called out that he'd found the

The police car caught up with the thieves place deserted. They asked him if anything was missing. He said he couldn't tell yet, but the display cases hadn't been disturbed. The cops again mentioned the third man the thieves had referred to, and this time Turney heard the

name. One of the thieves chimed in with something about 'Bell, the double-crosser,' and Turney said it was impossible that Chris Bell would have been involved in such a thing."

Bert took a deep breath. Nobody spoke. They were listening to him with intense interest.

"But the police," Bert went on, "didn't share Turney's faith. They hadn't reacted to the name Bell when they first heard it, but now they thought they had the whole thing figured out-that Bell had been in on it and that he was probably getting away at that very moment. Originally, they'd planned to stand by at the store until their chief arrived. Hilldale has only a four-man police force and one of the men was sick, so the chief was the only other man available. They'd radioed to him, but he was at home in bed and it would take him a little while to get there. They decided not to wait. They told Turney that if he wasn't afraid to stay alone at the store until the chief got there, they'd go right to Bell's rooming house and try to prevent him making a getaway in his car. When they got there, there was no sign of Bell, though his car was parked in front of the house. Bell was never seen again. And, in the meantime, Turney was discovering that the vault in the back office, which had appeared to be shut when he first glanced at it, had actually been opened and ransacked. When the chief arrived, Turney told him that he figured the missing stuff totaled about two hundred thousand dollars' worth. And that's the story."

The second hand on the office clock spun almost all the way around before any of the others said a word. Then they all began to ask questions at once. How had Rogers and Wright met Bell? Had any of the missing jewelry ever turned up? Had Bell ever been in trouble with the law before?

Bert could answer none of them except the last. Bell had never been in trouble in the past, and Turney was by no means the only one in Hilldale who thought well of him. He was generally liked, though of a quiet and retiring disposition.

"Of course," Bert added bitterly, "that was held against him after the robbery. Before that, people had always thought of him as shy. Afterward, they called it being 'secretive.'"

Pop looked sober. "It's a pretty grim business, Bert," he said. "We'll certainly keep at it until we get the full story. We'll want to hear Bell's own side of it as soon as he's able to talk. But I can't think of anything more we can do tonight, can you? And we do have a paper to get out tomorrow," Pop went on, in the gruff tone he usually used to conceal emotion. "So I suggest we all put in a good stiff hour or so of work and then get a little sleep."

"There is one thing we might do," Ken said slowly. "Call the Pennsylvania State Penitentiary-I suppose that's where Rogers and



Wright are-and see if we can set up an appointment to interview them."

The sudden hopeful look on Bert's face died away. "They've said enough already. They're the ones who implicated Bell in the first place."

"I know," Ken said. "But look, Bert, either Bell was in on the job or he wasn't. If he wasn't, then Rogers and Wright were lying. If we could find out that they *were* lying--"

Bert interrupted. "And what makes you think we could find that out, if the district attorney couldn't? After all, they must have been questioned pretty thoroughly. So whatever story they told, it must have been good, whether it was true or not."

"But the only person who would have had any real interest in showing them up as liars would have been Bell himself," Ken persisted. "And he wasn't there. Besides, since Rogers and Wright were confessing to their parts in the robbery, it would have been only natural for the prosecuting attorney to believe whatever they said, wouldn't it?"

Pop looked at Ken for a moment, glanced briefly at Bert, who was suddenly leaning forward with a new light in his eyes, and then picked up the phone. "Get me the warden, or whoever is on duty now at the Pennsylvania State Penitentiary," he said to the operator an instant later. "I'll hang on."

They all waited silently while the long-distance connection was made. Suddenly Pop was identifying himself and saying in his smoothest voice, "... and I'd like to know if the *Advance* can send a man up to interview two inmates of your institution, Chet Rogers and Pete Wright, sentenced about four years ago for attempted robbery in Hilldale.

"What?" Pop said a moment later. "When? ... I see. ... Is that so? ... Thanks very much." Slowly he put the telephone down. "Too late," he said. "The men were released a week ago."

Bert's pencil point snapped again.

"The warden said," Pop added quietly, "that my call was the second one tonight about those two men. The first one came twenty minutes ago from Hilldale's district attorney. He wants Rogers and Wright to testify at Bell's trial."

## CHAPTER IV

### THE EVIDENCE PILES UP

As usual on publication day, the big press in the back room of the *Advance* was already rumbling by seven o'clock the next morning.

By that same hour, four of the five desks in the front office were occupied. Bert was rattling off a story about a board-of-education meeting scheduled for the following evening. Pop was rounding off the last paragraph of an editorial. Ken and Sandy were reading proofs of long columns of classified advertising. But none of them was entirely unconscious of the big clock high on the wall.

Bert had called the hospital at six, while they hurried through a typically rushed, publication-day breakfast, to learn that Bell had regained consciousness half an hour earlier, but would be allowed to see no one until the doctor's visit scheduled for eight. "Then I may be able to see him shortly after eight?" Bert had asked. "That's possible," the cautious spokesman for the hospital had said. "If you phone again then, I'll try to have an answer for you."

Now Bert ripped the sheet of paper out of his typewriter, read the story, and then crossed the room to drop it on Pop's desk. "How about phoning Dewald now?" he asked.

Pop Allen frowned. "Lawyers don't enjoy being disturbed at breakfast any more than most people," he said. "I suppose we could call him now, but--"

"No. You're right," Bert broke in. "No use having him prejudiced against Chris, just because we didn't let him finish his coffee."

The rumble of the press suddenly deepened to a roar as the door from the composing room swung open and the shop foreman, Hank, came into the front office. He dropped half a dozen still-wet proof sheets on Ken's desk, then stalked across to Pop's corner of the room to pick up the editorial the *Advance* editor had just deposited in a wire basket.

"This all you've got for me?" Hank demanded scathingly. "What are we running here—a newspaper or a debating society?"

"Sometimes I wonder myself," Pop told him. He rapidly scanned Bert's story. "You can have this."

"You can take these proofs back with you, Hank!" Ken called out. "And you'd better oil that linotype machine. It made three errors in one column today."

Hank grinned. "Sometimes even oil doesn't help that machine to spell right."

As Hank departed, the front door opened and a boy from the back

room, who regularly made the early-morning pickup at the post office, deposited a fat roll of newspapers on Pop's desk.

"The Hilldale *Heralds*?" Bert asked.

"Looks like it." Pop handed him the thick roll.

Bert ripped off the wrapping, and began to read the big-headlined story on the front page while he was still flattening out the curled sheets.

Instinctively Ken and Sandy started from their seats to get a look at the papers, but they caught Pop's stern eye and sat down again.

"The show must go on," Ken said resignedly.

"The show," Sandy responded, "is about to begin."

Ken followed his glance through the front window. Maribelle Clewes, for thirty years the society editor of the *Advance*, was trotting across the street toward the office door. There were people in Brentwood who claimed they had never seen Maribelle walk, and Maribelle herself cheerfully admitted that walking was a form of locomotion completely inadequate to the demands of a society editor's life.

"I see this is our gray day," Sandy added, as Maribelle arrived in a breathless rush.

The boys found regular amusement in Maribelle's firm belief in matching colors. Today was, as Sandy had pointed out, Maribelle's gray day. Her shoes, her suit, her gloves, her purse and her hat were all gray, and almost exactly matched the color of her curly hair. The previous day Maribelle had worn blue to match her eyes.

But the boys' automatic grins, at the sight of the society editor, died quickly today before Maribelle reached her cluttered desk. They had both remembered that Maribelle attracted gossip as naturally as a magnet attracts iron filings, and realized that even at this hour of the morning she would have heard the news of Magnus's disappearance and his accident the night before. Furthermore, when Maribelle knew something, she always wanted to talk about it. And how Bert would react to Maribelle's chatter about the vanishing magician was a question they asked each other with silently raised eyebrows.

"Delicious!" Maribelle was saying, plumping herself down in her chair. "Simply delicious!"

Only Bert, buried deep in the Hilldale *Heralds*, ignored this characteristic pronouncement.

"What is?" Pop asked automatically.

"The Gallardi wedding." She removed the cover from her typewriter as she spoke. "Marie looked beautiful! Sandy, where are the pictures?"

"Two points off your starboard bow," Sandy told her, pointing to one corner of her desk.

Ken, hoping to keep Maribelle on the safe topic of the wedding, grinned at her while she reached for Sandy's photographs and spread them out on her desk. "I can hardly wait to read your story about the delicious event," he told her, over the top of a sheaf of proofs. "The bride was resplendent in orange burlap, which proved a perfect foil for her lovely green hair. Her bouquet of dandelions was a veritable glory of-"

"I never in my life wrote that a bouquet was a Veritable' anything," Maribelle interrupted him indignantly. "But if you would care to discuss writing style, I might point out that some of those horrible crime stories you've written-That reminds me, speaking of crime, what's all this I hear about that magician-Magnus, or some such name-turning out to be a criminal wanted by the police?"

Pop was talking, loudly, before she had half finished her last sentence. "Maribelle," he said, "the sooner you can let me have that Gallardi story, the better pleased Hank will be."

"I'll have the story for you in no time." Her short, plump fingers began to dance over the keys. But Maribelle could maintain a conversation while typing as well as through determined interruptions. "The way I heard the story about the magician," she went on, raising her voice over the rattle of her machine, "was that Bert spotted him behind his disguise and tipped off Andy Kane, and that-"

"Maribelle!" Pop roared. "Stop gossiping!"

"Gossiping!" Maribelle looked amazed. "Why, I'm just discussing the news of the day. And if a newspaper office isn't the place to discuss news, what is?"

"You're the society editor-not the crime reporter."

"Leave Maribelle alone, Pop!" Bert cut in. "She's only saying what everybody will be saying soon."

"You mean it isn't true?" Maribelle demanded.

"It's true, all right," Bert told her. "Except that we don't know yet that Magnus is a criminal-and except that I didn't tip off Andy Kane, as you put it."

"Oh, but everybody will give you the credit, Bert!" Maribelle said warmly. "Surely it was you who were at the hospital, and who told Andy Kane what Magnus's real name is, wasn't it? And that's how-"

"All right. You win. I tipped off the police." Bert's face had suddenly gone pale again, and he thrust a *Hilldale Herald* up in front of himself as if he were retreating behind a barricade.

Maribelle's fingers slowed to a halt, and her round blue eyes stared unhappily at the concealing newspaper. Then she turned to Pop. "Oh, dear," she said, "I just know I've done something dreadful! But I don't know what it is."

Pop no longer roared at her. His voice was quiet as he said, "It's not your fault, Maribelle. It's just that your source of information wasn't strictly accurate. Bert went to the hospital to see what he could do to help a man who had once saved his life. That time Bert was injured in Vermont--"

Maribelle clapped a plump hand over her mouth. "Oh, Bert! Is that who Magnus is? I didn't know! Oh, I'm so sorry! How terrible for you!"

"Forget it," Bert said, from behind the paper. "Of course you didn't know."

"But why aren't we all doing something then?" Maribelle demanded. She swung around and glared at the boys. "You two-you think you're such Sherlocks-why are you sitting around here reading those silly proofs? Why aren't you out discovering how to clear the poor man of suspicion?"

Ken was grinning in spite of himself, at Maribelle's sudden shift of mood. "Somebody has to read proofs!" he pointed out.

"Well, give them to me. I'll have this wedding story done in no time. And I was reading classified proofs around here before you were born. I can do it again."

"Look, Maribelle," Sandy said, "we can't do anything-nobody can do anything-until we see the man himself. And he can't be seen until the doctor's visited him at eight o'clock."

Maribelle glanced at the clock. It was not quite seven thirty. "Oh, all right," she said. Then she turned to glare at Pop. "Have you arranged for a lawyer?"

Pop sighed. "You just looked at the clock yourself, Maribelle. We're letting Dewald finish his breakfast first. Don't worry. We're doing all we can and we'll keep on doing it. Now if you could just give me about a half-column on that wedding--"

"Right." Maribelle was typing again furiously. "But remember you can count on me," she added.

The minutes ticked by. Hank came in again to pick up more of the proof sheets and departed to make the indicated corrections. Maribelle finished her wedding story and rattled off several brief paragraphs of coming social events. Pop took a call from the owner of a large market and spent ten minutes convincing the man that it was too late to change his regular full-page ad. The boys finished the proofs and Sandy delivered them to Hank.

Bert dropped the last of the half-dozen newspapers onto his desk and shoved back his chair.

Pop looked up instantly, as if he had been waiting for a signal. "Not good?"

"Not good," Bert agreed, and everybody in the room stopped

working to listen to him. "The only hopeful item in the whole mess is that Cedric Balfour, Chris's employer, insisted all the way through the case that he didn't believe Chris was guilty. He wasn't on hand that night-he lives on the outskirts of town and hadn't heard the burglar alarm. He came into town later, when Turney phoned him. But even when Turney finally gave in and said it was hard to believe Chris had taken the stuff, but that it was the only explanation that made sense, Balfour still said no-that the Chris Bell he knew could never have done such a thing."

Bert walked to the window and stood looking out at Brentwood's main street, now slowly coming to early-morning life. "The only trouble with that testimonial," he added, "is that it doesn't prove anything. It's just a conviction-like mine." He turned back to the room. "The truth is that the more I learn about the case, the blacker it looks for Chris."

"Well, hang onto yourself for another half hour or so," Pop said calmly. "We still haven't heard his side."

Ken initialed a sports page proof, put it aside for Hank, and said, "Mind if we look at the newspapers, Bert? Is the story of the men's trial there?"

Bert answered almost as coolly as if he were discussing an ordinary news story. "There wasn't any trial to speak of. They pleaded guilty and were sentenced to the penitentiary. But there's a detailed account of their examination, in which they involved Chris right up to his ears."

"O.K. if we take a few minutes to look at it, Pop?" Sandy asked. At Pop's nod, both the boys moved to Bert's desk and began to study the stories.

They skipped rapidly over the factual account gleaned from the two Hilldale police officers who had apprehended Rogers and Wright, learning little more except that the burglar alarm had gone off at 2:40 in the morning of December 11-a Sunday. By 3:10 that same morning, just half an hour later, Rogers and Wright were in jail, Turney had discovered the theft from the vault, and a four-state alarm had gone out for Christopher Bell.

Ken and Sandy had just come to the report of the thieves' examination when Pop joined them. They all scanned the account together.

Rogers and Wright had both given permanent addresses in Pittsburgh, where, the newspaper had learned, the two men had twice been indicted for illegal entry, although in each case they had been acquitted for lack of positive identification.

Part of the newspaper report was in the form of statements by Prosecuting Attorney Harvey Twill, who seemed thoroughly convinced

of Bell's complicity in the Hilldale affair. Pop and the boys read Twill's words with particular interest:

"According to the voluntary statements made by the prisoners," Twill said, "they had been looking over the Balfour store for the duration of their week's stay in Hilldale, during which time they posed as salesmen canvassing the district in connection with a household-appliance sales campaign. Their original intention was to break into the store and crack the vault, but they decided later to seek to obtain Bell's assistance. They chose him, because they knew he possessed a key to the front door and also knew the combination of the store vault.

"Knowing that Bell customarily ate his evening meal at the Triangle Restaurant," Twill stated, "Rogers and Wright contrived to strike up a casual conversation with the missing man there a week ago." Twill quoted Rogers as saying that "Bell caught on to what we were suggesting right away, and told us to meet him later that night on a country road a couple of miles out of town, where we could talk more freely."

According to Rogers and Wright, Bell stated that it would be a simple matter for him to shut off the burglar alarm while opening the shop door, and then to open the vault. "At first Bell wanted half the loot for his share," Twill quoted Wright as saying, "but he finally agreed to divide it three ways. Each of us would get one third."

Bell is alleged to have told the two men that he had often thought of robbing the store himself, but had feared he would be suspected, since only one other employee possessed a key to the front door and knew the vault combination. Furthermore, Bell is said to have declared, he himself had no contacts for disposing of stolen merchandise.

"Rogers and Wright declare that they and Bell thus readily came to an agreement," Twill stated. "Bell was to supply his special knowledge; the other two agreed to mark up the outer lock and the vault itself, and cut the alarm wires before leaving the store, so that it would appear that the shop had been broken into. Rogers and Wright also agreed to sell the stolen goods, and give Bell his share in cash.

"Rogers and Wright say," Twill added, "that it was Bell's failure to stifle the burglar alarm that caused the whole plan to fail. Anger at Bell then caused the two men to reveal their part in the affair. Told of the disappearance of two hundred thousand dollars' worth of merchandise from the Balfour vault, Rogers said, 'I guess he decided to risk trying to sell it himself. What did he have to lose? He saw we were caught, and knew the police would learn the whole story. So, since he had to make a getaway anyhow, he probably figured he might as well take some loot along with him.'"

The story concluded with a statement from Hilldale's police chief, who declared that:

"Bell can't get very far, with a constant watch on all railroad, air, and bus terminals. I think we can safely promise an early capture of the fugitive."

" 'Early capture!' " Sandy snorted.

Ken pushed the paper aside and picked up the one below it, dated a week later. The jewelry-store theft was still front-page news, under a bold headline:

JEWEL THIEVES TO BE SENTENCED

TODAY MISSING CLERK STILL AT LARGE

"Nothing new here," Ken muttered.

"Wait a minute," Pop said, as Ken was about to refold the sheet. "Look at that last paragraph."

The Allied Surety Company, the paragraph said, had that day reimbursed Balfour for the value of the stolen merchandise.

"That means insurance detectives were on Bell's trail too," Ken said thoughtfully. "And still he wasn't found!" For Bert's sake he swallowed the rest of the thought that came instantly to mind: that normally only a very skillful man, experienced in subterfuge, could evade highly trained insurance detectives.

By the date of the next and last newspaper in the pile, the story had receded in news value and rated only a single-column headline:

BELL STILL AT LARGE REWARD POSTED

"I feel sorry for anybody who turns up with the idea of trying to give that reward to Bert," Sandy said in a voice so low that it reached only Ken's ear.

Pop was straightening up. "That's that, I guess. And it doesn't really tell us much we didn't know before," he added cheerfully, not referring to the damaging evidence given by Rogers and Wright on Bell's apparent eagerness to join in the robbery plotted against Bell's own employer. Pop glanced at the clock. "Ten minutes past eight, Bert. I suppose you might try phoning the hospital now."

Bert was reaching for the phone when the front door opened and Andy Kane strode in. He waited to see what Andy had to say.

"Morning." The Brentwood police chief was obviously ill at ease, and he looked more awkward than ever when Maribelle Clewes pointedly ignored his general greeting. "Just wanted to say how sorry I am about-" Kane paused and cleared his throat.

"You couldn't have done anything else, Andy," Pop told him. "We all know that."

"Realize you do, but still-" Kane cleared his throat again. "Anyway, knowing how you all feel about this fellow Bell, I wanted to let you know I talked to him this morning."



Bert was suddenly on his feet. "I thought nobody was allowed to see him until after Doc Tasker examined him at eight o'clock."

"Doc phoned me himself," Kane explained. "Seems he saw Bell shortly after seven, and that the first thing Bell said was that he wanted to see me. Doc decided that he wanted to get something off his chest, and that the best thing for him was to be allowed to do it as soon as possible. He did too-wanted to confess."

"Confess!" Bert's voice rose on the word.

"Confess to being Christopher Bell, I mean," Kane said quickly.

Ken waited a moment, then asked the question that he knew Bert could not bring himself to ask. "Did he say anything about the robbery?"

"Not to me," Kane said. "But he did ask me if I'd send for the Hilldale police. He had something he wanted to tell them. It turned out I didn't have to send for them, though. The Hilldale D.A.-fellow by the name of Twill-was waiting downstairs in the hospital when I left Bell's room. He must have driven half the night to get here so early. He's with Bell now, and so's our own D.A."

Bert strode forward until he was looming above the stubby police chief. "You mean they're questioning Bell without a lawyer on hand to protect his interests-a man as badly injured as Bell is? What kind of legal procedure is that?"

"Now, Bert," Kane protested, "I told you Bell asked to see somebody from Hilldale. And-"

"But Bell doesn't know what he's doing!" Bert snapped. "Why, he's probably still hazy from the anesthetic!"

"Bert," Pop said quickly, "you should know Andy and our prosecuting attorney both well enough to know they wouldn't take advantage of an injured man. You also know a prosecutor has the right to question suspects. And if Bell himself asked to see somebody, and Tasker said he was fit to talk, I'm afraid you'll have to accept the situation."

"Doc Tasker was there when the two prosecutors went into Bell's room," Kane assured Bert. "And I can tell you myself that Bell seemed to know perfectly well what he was doing. For example, he asked me about you right away, Bert."

"He did?"

"That's right. He said he understood how things had happened last night, and that he'd like to see you. I explained to him as much as I could," Kane added. "Told him that you hadn't known anything about him, except that he'd once been a friend of yours. He seems like a mighty nice fellow, Bert."

"He is," Bert said quietly. "And thanks, Andy. I'll go up to the hospital right now, so I'll be there to see him as soon as he's finished

with the-the session he's having now."

"No need for you to wait around up there," Kane told him. "I'm going back to the hospital myself now, and I'll phone you as soon as the two prosecutors leave him."

Andy Kane moved toward the door but paused there for a final word. "Like I said, Bert, he seems like a nice chap. But if you folks are arranging for a lawyer for him--"

"We are," Pop said firmly.

"Yes. I thought probably you were. Well," the chief muttered, ill at ease again, "I just wanted to say it better be a good one!"

# CHAPTER V

## A GRIM BEGINNING

Maribelle Clewes exploded before the door had swung shut on Andy Kane's retreating back.

"Now will you call Dewald?" she demanded. "Whether he's finished his breakfast or not, that man has to—" But her voice dwindled away when she realized that Pop was already dialing the phone.

They all listened as Pop, a moment later, began to describe the situation to the man who had been his friend as well as his lawyer for many years. Pop didn't waste words. Dewald never needed to have things spelled out for him.

"He'll be down here at the office in fifteen minutes," Pop said to the others when he hung up.

"You don't think he ought to get right up to the hospital?" Bert asked. "We don't know what Chris might be saying to those two prosecutors."

Pop shook his head. "I agree with Dewald that he ought to have the whole case put before him first—at least as much as he can learn from us and those papers. After all, if Bell wanted to see the Hilldale man in order to confess to the theft, he's probably done that already. If he's innocent, he'll have said that too by now." Suddenly Pop's brows drew together in a fierce frown. "Have you finished that sports roundup yet?" And when Bert shook his head, Pop snapped, "Well, get it done then, if you expect to dash out of here before the morning's half over."

"Right, Pop." Bert's glance at his father was more grateful than anything else, as he settled down at his desk again to occupy his mind with the routine business of publication day.

"And the rest of you might do a little work, too, for a change!" Pop barked.

"Aye, aye, sir." Ken's quick response spoke for Sandy too, and Maribelle's typewriter also began to pound again as the boys returned to their desks.

Dewald arrived before they expected him, scarcely ten minutes later. The dark-gray suit he wore, and the air of dignity about his tall well-groomed figure, made him look out of place in the informal newspaper office, but the moment he was seated beside Pop's desk, it was clear that he was at home there.

"All right. Let's have it," the lawyer said calmly. "Tell me first exactly what happened last night, so I'll know how you came into this."

"We came into it farther back than that," Bert explained. Briefly he described his first meeting with Christopher Bell, and the failure of his attempts to locate the man who had saved his life. Then, just as succinctly, he described the events of the previous evening, winding up with a reference to Kane's report on his early-morning visit to the hospital.

"So as soon as you can get up there yourself, to look after Bell," Bert concluded, "the better."

"Everything in good time, Bert," Dewald told him calmly. He glanced around at Pop and the boys. "Do any of you want to add anything?"

"There is one thing I'd like to say," Ken admitted.

"Well, let's have it."

"It's not a fact-it's just an impression," Ken told him. "But it sort of rounds out Bert's own opinion of Chris Bell. You see, I interviewed Don Beacon before last night's show. He's the local high school boy Bell chose to help out in his magic performance. And Beacon couldn't speak highly enough about Magnus, as he called him. It wasn't just that he admired him as a magician. Beacon said he'd never met anybody who was as patient and kindhearted as Bell had been during the auditions, and afterward. Maybe you think Beacon is too young to be much of a judge of character, but--"

"On the contrary," Dewald interrupted cheerfully, "I think young people often see things more clearly than their elders do. Besides, it's good news that that's the kind of impression Bell makes. Last night's audience liked him too?"

"Liked him first rate," Pop said firmly.

"Good." Dewald nodded. "After all, a man who can impress an audience is likely to be able to impress a jury. Anything else? No? Then let me get at those newspaper stories you mentioned."

Dewald read swiftly through the marked columns of the *Hilldale Herald*, adding new notes to the ones he had scribbled while Bert was talking. When he stowed both papers and notes away in his brief case, it was not yet quite nine o'clock. He snapped the brief case shut, picked up his hat, and stood up. "You coming along to the hospital, Bert?"

"Certainly." Bert was on his feet too. "Andy Kane said he'd phone when the prosecutors left, but--"

"Let's not wait for that," Dewald said. "Let's get on up there."

"Just a minute," Pop said. "I'm going to want a story on Bell, along with some pictures, if possible. And somehow, Bert, I don't think you're the one to do it. Besides, Ken's already written the account of last night events, and he might as well stick with it. So I think Sandy and Ken had both better go along with you."

Sandy grabbed up his camera and flashed Ken a glance of triumph. Both boys were eager to be in on the mystery of Bell's four-year disappearance, but they had hesitated to push themselves forward if Bert didn't want them. Now Pop had settled things, and they were relieved to see that Bert apparently didn't object to their assignments.

Dewald himself nodded. "Excellent," he said. "You two have done more than a little investigating of one kind and another in the past—and I may need an investigating staff before this job is done."

Andy Kane was heading for the telephone in the lobby of the hospital when all four of them pushed through the entrance doors a few minutes later. "Oh, there you are!" Kane said when he saw Bert. "I was just going to call you. And Mr. Dewald!" He stretched out his hand. "You representing Bell?"

"That's the idea," Dewald agreed. "Are we going to be able to see him now?"

"That's what I was going to phone about," Kane answered. "Twill, the Hilldale prosecutor, and Dan Sloan from our own D.A.'s office, were just leaving Bell's room when I came downstairs. They'll probably come through here in a couple of seconds."

"Here they are now," Bert remarked quietly.

Two men had just stepped out of the elevator in the short hallway leading from the hospital lobby, and they were walking toward the front entrance.

One of them, Dan Sloan, was familiar to Ken and the Allens as well as to Dewald. He was Brentwood's assistant prosecuting attorney, a stocky good-natured man, younger than his thinning gray hair made him appear. The other man was older, tall and spare, with prominent cheekbones and a mustache so thin that it almost looked as if it had been drawn with a pencil. He carried a brief case in one hand as he strode along talking to Sloan. "... Get hold of Rogers and Wright as soon as possible," he was saying. He stopped speaking when he saw Sloan wave a greeting to the group in the lobby.

"Morning, John." Sloan addressed Dewald first, and then smiled at Bert and the boys. "And I see the press is out in full force. I don't think any of you people know Harvey Twill," Sloan went on, presenting the man with him. "Mr. Twill is the prosecuting attorney from Hilldale, Pennsylvania. Mr. Twill, this is John Dewald, Brentwood's leading legal luminary. The two redheads are both Allens—Bert and Sandy, of the *Brentwood Advance*. Ken Holt is with the *Advance* too."

When the round of handshakes was concluded, Sloan asked Dewald, "Does your presence here mean that you're representing Bell?"

"You've made a logical assumption from the evidence," Dewald

told him, smiling.

Twill's small mustache twitched. "Well, counselor," he said, "for your client's sake I hope he gives you a more believable story than the one he just tried to get me to swallow."

"Really? What was it?" Dewald asked blandly.

Twill laughed. "I'll leave you to learn that for yourself. But all I can say is, you won't have a prayer if you come into court with it."

"Naturally I can't argue with you at the moment," Dewald said. "You have the advantage of me, having already interviewed my client-my injured and badly shaken client, may I add."

"Your client is in good enough condition to have concocted a fantastic story!" Twill snapped. "Furthermore, I would like to remind you that he himself asked to see me. So I hardly think you'll be able to suggest in court that there was any brutality on my part involved in our interview this morning."

"But of course not!" Dewald's knowing eyes suddenly looked round and innocent. "After all, we both serve justice, counselor. And it is my hope that we can conduct this case in a cooperative spirit."

"Provided," Twill pointed out, "that our ideas of justice in this case coincide."

"Exactly-and I'm sure they will eventually," Dewald said smoothly. "So, in reliance on your cooperation, may I ask a favor?"

Twill's mustache twitched again. "You may certainly ask it."

"Good. I will, of course, need a transcript of the court proceedings that concluded with the sentencing of Rogers and Wright, and-

"Those proceedings are naturally available to the public," Twill cut in. "As you perhaps know, you can obtain a copy of the transcript by requesting it from the clerk of the court."

Twill's sarcasm clearly made Sloan uncomfortable. As a member of the Brentwood prosecuting attorney's staff he was under obligation to co-operate with a representative from the Hilldale office, but it was obvious that he resented Twill's attitude.

Ken saw the young Brentwood man open his mouth as if to protest, and saw Dewald wink at him almost imperceptibly. Dan Sloan remained silent.

"Of course I can request it from the clerk of the court," Dewald said courteously. "But I thought that perhaps, in the interest of speeding up this case, you might let me have the copy you no doubt brought to Brentwood with you this morning."

"Personally," Twill said, and there was a note of open condescension in his voice, "I would not ask an opponent to supply me with documents I could readily obtain without his help."

"I quite understand." Dewald waved the matter aside with an airy gesture. "It is of no importance. But since you apparently made a great

effort to reach here at the first possible moment, I assumed that speed was vital to you, and I made the suggestion only in the hope of saving time. But if time is not a factor in this case, so far as you are concerned, I gladly withdraw my request."

What was Dewald up to, Ken wondered, and knew by the puzzled look Sandy sent him that his friend was wondering the same thing. But Sloan was now smiling faintly, and seemed to understand precisely what the Brentwood lawyer was aiming at. The smile deepened as Dewald went on in his suavely courteous voice.

"Incidentally, you must know-just as surely as I know that court records are available from the clerk of the court-that a Hilldale prosecutor has no jurisdiction here in Brentwood. Naturally, you also know that my client cannot be forced to go to trial in Hilldale unless this state grants extradition."

"Your client has waived extradition," Twill stated triumphantly. "He has informed me that he is willing to return to stand trial in Hilldale as soon as he is able to be moved."

Dewald's eyes widened. "But that was before he had been advised by counsel," he pointed out. "That decision was made by my client when he was in a weakened condition. Consequently, it is a decision that can easily be altered."

Twill's mouth opened and then shut again. He looked sharply at Dewald, whose face remained blankly innocent, and then he flashed a penetrating glance at Sloan. The Brentwood assistant D.A. avoided his eyes.

"Do you mean," the Hilldale man demanded, "that you people would fight extradition?" Before they could answer, he added, "It would be ridiculous. You couldn't win!"

"Perhaps we couldn't," Dewald agreed. "But an extradition fight can take such a long time-or haven't you found that to be the case? And when the wanted man has broken ribs, a leg fracture-" He looked questioningly at Bert. "You did say his leg was fractured, didn't you?"

Bert nodded. Now he too was grinning faintly. "It's a compound fracture," he said.

"Ah, yes. Serious things-requiring long hospitalization usually." Dewald shook his head as if in regret. "Yes, it might be weeks or even months before Bell could safely be moved."

Twill's face had gone red with suppressed anger. "Am I supposed to infer from all this," he demanded, "that if my office is more cooperative, your client's offer to waive extradition will stand?"

"My dear counselor!" Dewald looked startled. "How can I say, knowing nothing of the case as yet, what I will advise my client to do? You tell me he is willing to return to Hilldale to face trial. If I find this to be the case, when I have consulted with him-and if this appears to

me to be the wisest course to follow-then I will urge him to return voluntarily. I will even"-Dewald's eyes were suddenly twinkling-"do my earnest best to see that his recovery is speeded up to the point where he can be taken to Hilldale, by ambulance if necessary. More than this, of course, I could not possibly say now."

Twill stared at Dewald for a long moment. Then, surprisingly, he smiled and turned to Sloan. "I'm beginning to understand why you introduced Dewald as the leading legal luminary of this town." He was opening his brief case as he spoke. "Here's your transcript, Dewald," he said, handing over a thick sheaf of papers. "Please accept my apologies along with it. And to show you that I can co-operate," he added, "I'll notify you as soon as Rogers and Wright have been located."

Dewald took the document, his own smile as broad as Twill's. "Thank you, counselor. And now, Chief"-he swung toward Andy Kane, waiting in the background-"I'd like to see my client if I have the permission of the police."

"You certainly have. I'll go along upstairs with you and tell my man on the door that it's all right to admit you."

There were handshakes again, all around, and then Sloan and Twill headed for the front door. Bert, Ken, and Sandy followed Dewald and Andy Kane to the elevator.

"Boy!" Sandy murmured, as the car eased upward. "You certainly won the first round."

"That wasn't even a skirmish," Dewald said, still smiling.

"It wasn't?" Sandy blinked. "Well, anyway, you certainly made him back down."

"Don't underestimate Twill," Dewald said quickly. "Any man smart enough to give in on a minor matter like that is a man smart enough to give you trouble. But I think it's pretty clear," he added, looking at Bert, "that although Twill was expecting to hear a confession this morning, he actually heard nothing of the kind. And it's also clear that for the sake of his own reputation he's eager to have this case over and done with as soon as possible."

Bert nodded. "That's what I thought too." He looked more cheerful than he had for many hours.

Outside the door of Room 312, Andy Kane spoke to the uniformed policeman on duty there, explaining that Dewald was to be admitted to Chris Bell's room at any time he had reason to visit his client.

"And the same goes for the Allens and Ken," Kane added.

"Right, Chief."

"Can't you make it O.K. for Mom to come in too?" Ken asked. "You know her! She's probably cooking up enough food for the whole floor right now."



Kane nodded. "I know her all right. Yes," he instructed his man, "let Mrs. Allen in too if she comes here with something for Bell. I'll leave you now," he told the others. "Good luck."

"Thanks, Andy-for everything." Bert took a deep breath, opened the door of Chris Bell's room, and stepped slowly across the threshold. Dewald and the boys followed him.

The bed was facing the door, and the elaborate traction device rigged up to hold Chris Bell's broken leg in an extended position half concealed him from his visitors until they had moved around to stand beside him. Then they could see that Bell's mustache and beard had been shaved, and that the crown of his head was hidden beneath a turban-like bandage. Bell looked much younger than he had the night before, when he performed as Magnus the Magician. He also looked very pale. But his eyes were clear and they lighted up with his welcoming smile.

"Bert Allen!" he said quietly, reaching out toward the big redhead. "It's good to see you!"

"You can say that-after last night?" Bert asked gruffly, taking the hand in his own big one.

"Great guns!" Bell said. "Everything that happened last night was my own fault."

Bert's face was as red as his hair. "But I'm the one who--"

"Look, Bert," Bell said, "your police chief-a nice guy, by the way-told me how things worked out, and why. As a matter of fact, I'm glad they happened the way they did. Four years is a long time to be running away. It's a relief to stop."

"And I'm glad to hear you say that." Dewald, standing in the background, smiled at the man in the bed as he spoke.

Quickly Bert performed the introductions, and explained the reason for Dewald's presence.

Chris Bell was silent for a moment, then he said, "It's good to know I've got a lawyer. I'll need one. And to know I have friends too."

"You have the friends, all right," Dewald assured him. "The Allens are in back of you all the way."

"And when you've got the Allens with you," Ken added, "you're doing all right."

"I can see that already." Bell smiled. "Then, if there's room for all of you to sit down somewhere, I might as well start talking, I guess. Or do you want to ask me questions first?"

"Before you say anything at all," Dewald told him, "I want to explain something. Whatever you may say to me, as your attorney, is privileged-I can't be forced to divulge it. But that kind of privilege doesn't extend to friends. And if Bert and Sandy and Ken hear your story, and are then put on the witness stand--"

Bell broke in. "It would be all right," he said. "I've already told Twill the whole story-the same one I want to tell you. I have nothing to hide."

"Good!" Dewald beamed. "Then just to clear the air before you get started, let me ask you the question Twill probably asked you, even though I doubt if I'll be surprised at the answer. Did you rob Balfour's Jewelry Store in Hilldale four years ago?"

Bell looked directly at him. "No," he said. "I did not."

"Good!" Dewald beamed again. "You were nowhere near the store at the time of the robbery?"

"Oh, yes, I was," Bell answered. And when they all stared at him in sudden amazement, he added, "I'm the one who unlocked the store door for those two men that night."

In the utter silence that followed his words, Ken and Sandy turned instinctively to look at Bert. The color had drained from his face, so that the freckles stood out in startling contrast to his pallor, and Bert's mouth was a thin tight line.

"I think now," Dewald said finally, "we'd better hear the whole story."

# CHAPTER VI

## CHRIS BELL'S STORY

"If you've already told it once this morning, are you sure you're able to go through it again?" Bert asked the man in the bed.

Ken and Sandy knew that the harshness of Bert's voice was a sign of his concern. Christopher Bell's confession that he had opened the jewelry store for the two admitted criminals had been a staggering blow, and Bert was trying to convince himself that Bell was in no condition to know what he was saying.

Bell himself seemed to understand Bert's reasoning. "Yes, I want to go through it again, Bert," he said quietly. "I won't much enjoy the performance, but it's got to be done, and I want to get it over. But can't you find some place to sit down?" He smiled suddenly. "You're too tall to talk up to."

"Yes-sure we can." Bert awkwardly began to move the chairs in the room so that all four of them faced the bed.

The others helped him. Bell's fleeting grin, and the little flurry of activity, eased the tension in the room. But when they were all seated, the air of foreboding thickened once more. Deliberately Ken made a noisy business out of pulling a folded wad of copy paper from his pocket.

"Do you mind if I take this down?" he asked, in a voice that he tried to make entirely matter of fact.

"I think it's a good idea," Bell said.

"An excellent idea," Dewald chimed in heartily. "I was going to make notes myself, Ken, but if you'll take it all in shorthand that will be a great help."

Ken nodded. "I'll let you have a copy as soon as it's typed up."

None of them, then, could think of anything further to delay Bell's recital. In uneasy silence they looked at him and then looked away again.

Bell was no longer smiling. His face was sober, and his slender hands lay quietly on the bedcover, as if he were saving all his strength for an ordeal.

When he began to speak, his voice was thin, but it was clear and steady.

"I'd like to explain first," Christopher Bell said, "how I first got a job at Balfour's. It's not really part of the story, but it's part of the way I feel about the whole thing." He paused briefly.

"My parents both died in an influenza epidemic when I was three," he said, "and I have no real recollection of either of them. There were

no relatives to take me in. I was placed in an orphanage. I stayed there until I was eighteen-until I had finished high school. I remember it was the day after graduation when Mr. Balfour came to the orphanage looking for a boy to hire for general work around his store. He talked to me, and asked if I knew anything about bookkeeping and accounting. I told him I'd taken commercial courses in high school and he hired me that very day. He even drove me back to Hilldale with him that afternoon, helped me find a room at Mrs. Axel's boardinghouse, and made sure I was comfortable. It was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to me, to be given a chance to be out on my own, and to be working for a man who'd hired me because he liked me and had confidence in me. Ever since that day, Mr. Balfour's been the nearest thing to a father I've ever known."

Bell swallowed, as if unable to go on. He was not looking at any of them. His eyes seemed to be fastened on a point in space.

Gently, after a moment, Dewald asked, "What were your duties in the store?"

Bell's eyes closed briefly. When he opened them, he had shifted his gaze to the lawyer's face. "A little of everything," he said. His voice seemed stronger now, and not quite so remote. "I swept the place out in the morning. Washed the show windows. Dusted the display cases. Ran errands. Wrapped packages. Took care of Mr. Balfour's car. After a while, when I got my driver's license, I drove him to New York on his buying trips." He smiled faintly. "I'd been hired as a general handyman, and that's just what I was."

"But you didn't remain at that kind of work for long," Dewald prompted.

"No," Bell agreed. "I gradually began to do a little clerking and less cleaning. I guess it was about a year and a half after I went to Hilldale that Mr. Balfour said it was time I really started to learn the business. First, I remember, he went with me to buy what he called some 'behind-the-counter ties.' My own taste ran to pretty loud colors in those days. And then he recommended some night school courses for me to take. After a while I stopped waiting in the car when he went on his buying trips. He took me into the wholesale houses with him, discussed purchases with me, even began to ask my opinion once in a while. By the time I'd been there five years I was handling his books and clerking the rest of the time. A new boy he'd hired-another boy from the orphanage-was doing my old work. I guess it was about a year after that when Mr. Balfour told me he'd given me another raise and made me a junior executive. The title sounded sort of foolish, but it was his way of letting me know I'd become part of the store management. And that's when he gave me a key to the front door and told me the combination of the vault."

Bell paused for breath.

"How many employees were there in the store at that time?"

Dewald wanted to know.

"Let's see." Bell thought a moment. "There was Jim Turney, who'd always been Balfour's right-hand man; Ethel Burns, a kind of combination bookkeeper and secretary; Joe Wentzell, who did the watch repair and jewelry cleaning; two clerks -Alex Klaus and Grace Lyons; Tim Stanley, the new boy; and myself."

"That makes seven," Ken murmured.

Dewald nodded. "And how many of them had door keys and knew the vault combination?"

"Just Turney and myself, besides Mr. Balfour."

"Tell us about Jim Turney before you go on," Dewald suggested.

"Were your relations with him as good as they were with Mr. Balfour?"

"My relations with him? Oh, fine," Bell said. "He was younger than Mr. Balfour-about forty-five, I'd say, when I first went to Hilldale. Mr. Balfour was past fifty then. But Jim took a kind of fatherly interest in me too. He persuaded me to join the gym, and we bowled a night or so a week. We sometimes ate dinner together, too-Jim was a bachelor."

Bell smiled reminiscently. "That's partly why I learned about the store so quickly-Jim talked about it all the time. He'd worked for Mr. Balfour for twenty years by the time I was hired, and there was nothing he didn't know about the business. He interviewed the salesmen who came in, checked credit ratings, and had full charge of the mail-order business. Balfour's sent out catalogues once a year, you see, about three months before Christmas, and did an enormous business by mail all through that part of the state. Of course we carried-that is, Mr. Balfour carried-various appliances, like electric coffeepots and toasters, and a lot of fancy dinnerware, and some of the mail orders were for those things. But a good deal of it was for watches and jewelry. Altogether, the store was mighty busy during the last few weeks before Christmas."

His shoulders shifted against the pillows as he said the last words, and lines of discomfort creased the unbandaged part of his forehead.

"Are you all right?" Bert asked quickly. His voice no longer sounded harsh. He had been so absorbed in Bell's recital that he had almost forgotten the grim event with which the story must end.

"Perfectly all right," Bell assured him. "It's just that I get cramped lying in one position."

"Maybe you could raise yourself up a little if I-Here." Bert was beside the bed. "I'll move the pillows for you." Carefully he inserted an arm behind Bell's back, eased him slightly forward, and then with

the other hand swiftly plumped up the pillows and replaced them in a new position.

"Thanks, Bert. That's much better," Bell said gratefully.

"I seem to remember you doing the same thing for me more than once," Bert said gruffly.

Bell flashed him a swift smile and then he sobered. "Unfortunately that's not what we're here to talk about, Bert." His gaze shifted to Dewald. "O.K. Now, where was I?"

"Before you go on," Dewald suggested, "will you tell us whether there was anything unusual about the pre-Christmas conditions in the store four years ago? Were there any squabbles among the employees-or between any employee and Balfour? Were there any new clerks hired for the Christmas rush? You know, I presume," Dewald added calmly, "that you are suspected of having stolen two hundred thousand dollars' worth of merchandise. Was there that much stuff-stuff that could easily be carried away-in the store at that time?"

"The answer to your last question is definitely yes," Bell told him quietly. "Business was good that season. All the farmers in the area around Hilldale had had a good year, and all the merchants were feeling the results of it. Our mail-order business had gone way up. So had our business over the counter. Yes, we had a lot of expensive watches on hand-and a lot of bracelets and rings and earrings, all of them small enough, and valuable enough, to be put inside the vault every night. And I suppose if things were small enough to go in the vault, they'd be small enough, as you say, to be carried away easily. So far as your other questions are concerned-" He broke off apologetically. "What else was it you asked me?"

Ken flipped back a sheet and read from his notes.

"Was there anything unusual about the pre-Christmas conditions in the store then?"

"Nothing that I can remember," Bell said, after a moment's thought. "I told you that business was especially good, but even that wasn't so much different from other years as to be called unusual."

Again Ken flipped back to his earlier notes. "Were there any squabbles among the employees or between any employee and Balfour?"

Bell moved his head slowly back and forth against the pillows. "Not that I can remember-and I think I'd remember something like that. You see, I never heard any employee express a complaint against Mr. Balfour. He was a good boss, considerate and fair. Besides, he always paid everybody on the staff a Christmas bonus, and since business was good that year, everybody expected the bonus to be larger than usual. No-none of us were squabbling with him, as you say. And we always worked well together, even in rush times when we

all got tired, we weren't squabbling among ourselves."

This time Bell looked directly at Ken when he finished, and Ken read off the last unanswered question. " 'Were there any new clerks hired for the Christmas rush?'"

Again Bell made the slight movement that they all understood was meant as a shake of the head. "Extra rush-season employees were never practical at Balfour's. We had too much valuable stuff on hand then to make it feasible to take on strange clerks. Of course," he added as an afterthought, "Mrs. Balfour always came down to the store and helped out when we were busy. She'd helped her husband build up the business. They'd run it together for several years in the beginning, before it was big enough to support extra help, and she'd always kept her hand in."

"That's that, then." Dewald looked so thoughtful that nobody else spoke. Bell too seemed to be waiting for the lawyer's signal before he went on.

"You've given us a good background of the whole picture," Dewald said after a moment. "Now, if you'll just tell us about your relationship with Chet Rogers and Pete Wright, I think we'll be ready to get on to the night of the theft itself."

Bell's hands, which had been lying flat on the bedcover, clenched swiftly shut. With what appeared to be an effort he opened them again, uncurling the long fingers until they once more lay pressed against the hospital-white fabric. "My relationship with Rogers and Wright," he said slowly, in a cold voice they had not heard him use before, "began and ended that night. I had never seen them before. I have never seen them since."

Dewald leaned forward abruptly in his chair. Ken looked up from his notes and met Sandy's eyes in a brief startled glance. Somehow, Chris Bell's last words seemed the most hopeful of any they had yet heard. Both boys then looked at Bert. Like Dewald, he had leaned forward.

"I see." Dewald's voice had a new warmth in it. "Let's have the whole story of that night then. Better begin earlier in the day-in the morning, say-and run right through."

Bell nodded. "It was a Saturday," he began. "Like all Saturdays that close to Christmas, we were busy. Mrs. Balfour was helping out. Mr. Balfour was behind the counter all day too-scarcely stepped into his office for more than a minute at a time-because Jim Turney was jammed up with a flock of mail orders and I had to be out in the back room with him most of the time helping to get them filled." Slowly, as he talked, Bell's voice lost its queer chill. But he no longer seemed to be speaking directly to his listeners. It was as if he were reciting a story to himself-a story he knew by heart.

"We were so rushed all day that none of us had time to go out for lunch," Bell went on. "I remember Mrs. Balfour telephoned for sandwiches, and how careful she was to get the kind each one of us liked. I helped Jim most of the day, right up until about six. Then there was such a rush of customers -people coming in to town for a movie, and stopping first to do some Christmas shopping-that Jim and I had to leave the rest of the mail orders and come out front to help. The rush was over by eight thirty. By nine we began to close up."

Dewald slipped in a quiet question. "Did all the most valuable stock go into the vault when you got ready to close?"

"Yes, of course-all the rings, some of the better watches, and a lot of other small jewelry. Mr. Balfour always put in as many of the trays as the vault would hold. It took about a half an hour to straighten up and close that night. Mr. Balfour locked up the vault the last thing, while Jim and I checked the back door and the windows-they're all protected by the same burglar alarm that covers the front of the store. Then Mr. Balfour asked me if I would mind going past the bank on my way home and depositing the money that had come in during the day."

"Was that an unusual request for him to make of you?" Dewald wanted to know.

"Not unusual, exactly," Bell answered. "Jim usually made the deposits, but I had made them before."

"Why wasn't Turney asked to do it that night?"

"Because Mr. Balfour knew how tired he was. I remember him saying, 'Jim, you look as beat as I feel. Let's let the junior executive take care of the cash while we three oldsters get our creaking bones off to bed.'"

"I see." Dewald nodded. "Was there a lot of money to be deposited?"

"I don't remember the exact amount, but there must have been several thousand dollars in cash and a good many checks."

"You weren't worried to be walking down the streets with it?"

"Of course not." Bell looked surprised. "The bank was only two blocks away down Main Street, and there were still a lot of people around at that hour."

"Did you all leave the store together-the Balfours and the rest of the staff?" Dewald asked.

"No. There was a big dance in town that most of them were going to, so Mr. Balfour had sent the rest of the staff home as soon as the store closed officially at nine. He and Mrs. Balfour and Jim and I had straightened up. We four walked out together and Mr. Balfour locked the door."

"Did he put the burglar alarm on himself?"



“It went on automatically when the door was locked. It was controlled by a special device Mr. Balfour had had put on—a sort of double lock. When you unlocked the door you also released that device and shut off the burglar alarm.”

“I see.” Dewald nodded. “So Balfour locked the door himself. And then what? Did you all separate on the sidewalk?”

“I don’t know what happened to the others, though I do know they weren’t going to the dance. Jim Turney and the Balfours may have stopped somewhere together—or separately, for all I know. I walked on up Main Street to the bank, dropped the money into the night-deposit slot, and continued north along Main to the Triangle Restaurant, where I often ate. I was too tired to be very hungry. Just had an omelette and some coffee, I think. Anyway, I remember being glad I wasn’t going to the dance. It couldn’t have been much more than a few minutes after ten when I left the Triangle and started home.”

The quiet voice didn’t resume after the end of the sentence. Suddenly the slender hands clenched into tight fists again, and this time Bell’s whole thin body seemed to have tightened.

Bert moved half out of his chair toward the bed, and then turned on Dewald. “We can’t do this to him!” he muttered fiercely. “It isn’t fair! He can’t take any more!”

Dewald looked troubled. Ken could feel his own fingers gripped too tightly around his pencil.

“It’s all right, Bert,” Chris Bell said, before any of the rest of them spoke. “It’s just that I’ve had nightmares for four years about what happened that night after I left the restaurant. Even now, when I want to talk about it, it’s not easy to—But I’m all right. If I could just have a glass of water I’d—”

“Sure. Sure, right here.” Bert had leaped to his feet and was sloshing water out of the pitcher on the bureau into the glass beside it. Gently he raised Chris Bell’s bandaged head until he could drink. When the glass was empty, Bell lay back again and his fisted hands uncurled until they were once more flat on the counterpane.

“Thanks, Bert.” He waited a moment, and then started speaking rapidly, as if eager to conclude the story. “My rooming house was on Chestnut, two blocks north of the Triangle and about a block west. I wasn’t walking very fast, even though it was pretty cold that night. I’d just turned into Chestnut when a car swung around the corner after me and pulled up alongside. The man in the driver’s seat had his window open and he leaned out and asked me something. I couldn’t hear what he said, though he seemed to be asking directions of some kind. I stopped and walked over to the curb. Just as I got there, the rear door of the sedan opened and a man I hadn’t noticed, in the back seat, suddenly got out.

“At first I didn’t realize”-Bell’s voice was racing now-“that he had a gun in his hand. I didn’t see it until he shoved it right at me, against my ribs. I moved back a step, automatically. He came after me. He told me to get in the car if I didn’t want to get hurt. I said something-I don’t know what-about not understanding, wanting to know what was going on. He told me there’d be time for questions later-that there was a little job they wanted me to do for them. Then he jabbed at me with the gun again and told me to get in the car. I did. There wasn’t anything else I could do. I knew by the look on his face that he meant business.”

The swift voice stopped, out of breath.

It was Bert who spoke the words they were all thinking.

“So that,” he said, “is how you got involved with Chet Rogers and Pete Wright! I knew it! It couldn’t have happened any other way.”

## CHAPTER VII

### PANIC

“Yes.” Grimly Christopher Bell repeated Bert’s words. “That’s how I became involved with Chet Rogers and Pete Wright.”

Ken’s fingers stopped making symbols on his copy paper when Bell’s voice ceased speaking, but his mind was flying ahead, already phrasing the story in which he would present Chris Bell to the world, not as a criminal, but as a victim. How wonderful for Bert, he was thinking, that the man who had saved his life could now be saved in return. When the facts had been made public about Bell being kidnapped and coerced into opening the jewelry store-At least, Ken reminded himself, that must be the way it had happened. But the realization that he was running ahead of Bell’s own story made him unmindful for the moment that an injured man shouldn’t be pressed beyond his strength. “What then?” he asked. “Did they drive you to the jewelry store and force you to-“

“It couldn’t have been that quick.” Dewald’s calm voice interrupted him. “Mr. Bell has brought his story up to only ten o’clock that night. The burglar alarm at the store went off, if I remember correctly, at two forty the next morning. Do you feel up to filling in the time gap for us, Mr. Bell? Or would you rather postpone the rest of your story?”

“No. No, I want to finish it.” Bell took a deep, shuddering breath. “I want to finish it now.”

He lay quiet for a moment then. The others in the room could sense him gathering his strength to continue, marshaling his thoughts to present them as clearly as possible.

“I could see people and lights half a block away, on Main Street,” Bell began finally. “But Chestnut was darker, and happened to be deserted at that moment. When those two men drove off with me in their car, I don’t think anyone saw it happen. The bigger one of the two-his partner called him Chet-was at the wheel, and he drove straight out of town to an old cemetery on Valley Road. He pulled in there among some trees, turned off his headlights, and stopped. We stayed there for about four hours.”

Bell had been staring blankly, as he talked. Now he lowered his eyes to look at the lawyer and then at Bert and the boys.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but I don’t remember everything that happened during those four hours. They seemed like four days. They told me right away what they expected me to do. Open the front door of the store for them-they seemed to know that when I did that it would automatically turn off the burglar alarm-and then open the

vault. I realized they might have watched me open the store in the morning, so I couldn't pretend not to have a key. Besides, they could have searched me and found the key in my pocket. But I didn't see how they could be sure I knew the vault combination, so I told them I didn't. They just laughed. One of them said, 'Don't try to kid us. We've been watching you through binoculars from our hotel room. It's easy to see into your boss's office from there. Don't tell us you can't open the vault. We've seen you do it.' And when they told me they'd had an upper room on the north side of the Hilldale Hotel, just across the alley from the store, I had to believe them. It would be easy to see into Mr. Balfour's office from there if you had strong enough glasses.

"The rest of that wait is blurred in my mind," Bell went on. "They played the car radio most of the time, I remember. And once in a while they'd start arguing, as if they were going over an old quarrel. I knew it was about me. The one called Chet had told me what they expected me to do, but the other one, Pete, seemed to disapprove of Chet's plan. He wanted to take my key, force me to give them the vault combination, and do the job without me. And though he'd apparently agreed to Chet's plan earlier, he still brought up his scheme several times. Each time Chet pointed out that I might not give them the right combination, even if they tied me up and told me they wouldn't release me until they'd finished the job. After a while I didn't even try to listen to the arguments. I could tell they were going to follow Chet's original plan, that they were going to make me open the door and the vault at the point of a gun, and I was trying to figure out some way to prevent them from getting away with it when the time came."

"Did they have a specific time in mind?" Dewald wanted to know. "Or were they just waiting for it to get late enough so that the streets would be deserted?"

Bell took a deep, shuddering breath

"Oh, I forgot about that! No, they'd planned to reach the store at exactly two thirty-five," Bell explained. "They'd been watching the Hilldale police cruiser, they said, and knew the car passed the store at two, on its way north, and didn't pass it again until three, when it came back down Main Street. So they'd scheduled the job very carefully, to fit it in between the cruiser's regular passings."

"You said you were trying to figure out a plan to thwart them," Dewald reminded him. "Did you work out anything?"

"Yes, in a way," Bell admitted. "I thought probably they didn't know that the burglar alarm could be set off-even when the door was wide open-by pressing one of the four alarm buttons underneath the store's counters. So what I hoped was that somehow, once we got inside the store, I could get far enough away from that gun to reach an

alarm button before they stopped me. That would at least make them run, I thought, before they had a chance to get at the vault. And with any luck, I thought, they'd be picked up before they got very far. The police cruiser is never any real distance away from the store between its two and three o'clock passings."

"Smart idea!" Sandy muttered, half under his breath. "Lots smarter than trying to put up a fight there in the car, where you wouldn't have stood a chance."

Ken grinned to himself. Despite his absorption in Bell's story, Sandy's words had reminded him of numerous tight spots in which he and the redhead had been caught. Invariably, in those predicaments, Sandy's rage had made him want to attempt a break at a time when the odds were hopelessly against them, and Ken had barely managed to persuade him to save his strength for a more likely moment. Some day, Ken thought, he must remind Sandy of his words of admiration for Bell's decision.

Then Ken realized that Bell was speaking again.

"... parked the car a few blocks away and we got to the store on schedule," Bell was saying. "The street was deserted. They crowded after me into the recess between the two show windows and told me to open the door. Chet's gun was digging a hole in my back. I opened the door. Everything was quiet. They came in right behind me. The night light was dim and there were deep shadows along the counters. Pete swung around to close the door and I felt Chet turn a little, to watch him. That's when I did it. I dove around behind the right-hand counter. It seemed forever until my fingers felt the alarm button. And then the bell was ringing with a racket that deafened me.

"I didn't hear them leave," Bell said. "All I could hear was that clanging. I stayed there behind the counter, expecting a bullet any minute, trying to dig myself into the floor. Finally I realized they must have gone, and I got up then and ran for the door. I had some vague idea of calling to the police the minute they stopped in front of the store-I knew it wouldn't take them very long to respond to the alarm-and telling them where the men had parked their car. I thought maybe the police could reach it before the men did, and prevent them from getting away. But the first thing I saw was the cruiser, already past the store and about two blocks up the street. And in its headlights I could see four men struggling. I started to run toward them."

"*Toward* them?" Ken repeated the words, almost without knowing he spoke. He had been waiting for Bell to say he ran away, and wondering why he should have done such a thing when simply remaining on the spot would have made him a hero. Running toward the police was even more heroic-but simply unbelievable in view of what the newspapers had written about the case.

"Yes." Bell's mouth twisted in a curious grimace. "I *started* to run toward them. But I'd only covered a few yards, when suddenly, over the sound of the alarm bell, I could hear one of the men-Pete, I think, -yelling, I told you we couldn't trust that guy Belli? I stopped dead. And the next thing I knew I was ducking down a side street and running for my life. I didn't stop running until I reached the railroad yards and jumped aboard an empty boxcar on a freight, heading toward Pittsburgh. Actually, of course, I was still running when you saw me last night. I started haring off again when I realized you'd recognized me, Bert."

"But why, Chris? *Why?*" Bert almost groaned the words.

He was speaking for all of them who had heard Chris Bell's story.

Again Christopher Bell closed his eyes briefly, and his hands clenched and unclenched on the counterpane. When he opened his eyes he looked slowly around the room, first at Bert, then at the boys, and finally at Dewald, more impassive than the rest because he was less involved with the man on the bed.

"Do you believe my story so far, Mr. Dewald?" Bell asked quietly.

"I find it not unbelievable," Dewald answered, after only a momentary pause. "But, along with my young friends here, I do feel that the last bit of it is-shall we say?-inexplicable."

"But up until then?"

"Until the moment when you ran off," Dewald said, "it is a more credible story than many I've heard -than many I have persuaded a jury to believe, for that matter. I would certainly feel confident of my ability to convince a jury that your presence at Balfour's Jewelry Store that night was involuntary on your part."

Bell smiled faintly. "Thank you."

"But," Dewald went on, before Bell could continue, "I can only too easily see myself losing the jury's sympathy if I told them you ran off at the very moment the thieves, owing to your own intelligence and courage, were being apprehended by the police. The jury too would want to know why you did that. And if I couldn't give them a credible reason for it, I can easily see them beginning to doubt the whole story. Can you give us such a reason?"

Bell ran his tongue over his dry lips. Bert, seeing the movement, sprang up and brought him water again. Bell drank thirstily.

When Bert lowered him back against the pillows, Bell said, "I can give you a reason now. That night I don't think I understood it myself. I had to figure it out later. And I won't be surprised if you don't understand it. It didn't make sense to me for a long time."

"Try us," Dewald suggested encouragingly.

"Well, I was-" Bell stopped and began again. "You remember I told you I was brought up in an orphanage? I'll have to explain something

about that place now, because that's where it happened. That's where I became the sort of person who could run away, as I did, that night four years ago.

"The institution itself was pleasant," he went on, "and the administrators were good people trying to do a good job. But like every other such place-and like every school, for all I know-there was always at least one bully among the kids. There was a particularly vicious one among the boys I grew up with. Lou was his name. And I was Lou's scapegoat. It started, I suppose, because I was so small. I didn't really start growing until I was nearly fifteen, and before that I didn't look as if I could defend myself. So Lou and his cronies played jokes on me, ordered me around, and let me take the blame for everything they did. If one of them threw something in the dining hall, they all insisted I was responsible for it. If there was a fight at night in the dormitory, I was the one the administrators punished."

"But couldn't you explain to the authorities?" Bert broke in.

"I tried that," Bell told him. "One of the first times I found myself being punished for starting a fight-a fight I hadn't even taken part in-I told my house mother the whole story. She believed me too. Unfortunately, she also had the real culprits brought up before the chief administrator. The next night Lou and his gang got hold of me after lights-out. They said they had to teach me not to be a tattletale. They taught me, all right. I never dared go to the house mother about them again.

"After that, the situation began to snowball," Bell went on. He was speaking quietly, but the anger he still felt, over the events he was remembering, showed in his eyes. "Once I had a reputation for being a troublemaker, it was that much easier to blame me for anything that went wrong in the whole institution-for broken windows, for cookies stolen from the kitchen, for the stupid childish tricks Lou liked to play on members of the staff. I tried to fight him once or twice. I think I could have beaten him too. I was wiry enough, even if I wasn't very big. But Lou's gang always stepped in and took over, and I was no match for the whole crowd.

"So, by the time I was ten," Bell said grimly, "I'd learned to run away when I saw trouble starting. I knew by then that even the staff took for granted I was the worst offender in the place. The only defense I had was to get so far away from whatever was going on that I couldn't possibly be considered responsible for it. It became automatic. I'd take off instinctively if I just heard any of the boys plotting mischief. I knew that if I stayed around somebody would be sure to yell 'Look what Bell did!' or 'Bell started it!'-and I'd be up for more punishment. It had reached a point where I couldn't take any more. Sometimes I went only as far as the other side of the grounds,

or into another part of a building. But sometimes-five times, to be exact-I ran away from the orphanage. Got clear out into Ohio once when I was fourteen. But the police always found me and brought me back.

"So Twill will be able to say," Bell pointed out grimly, "that I was on the police books five times before I was even eighteen years old. It won't exactly help my case, will it?"

"I think it will," Ken said quickly. "What you've told us certainly helps me, anyway, to understand why you ran away that night in Hilldale. When you heard your name shouted out to the police, you must have been thrown into the same kind of blind panic you'd experienced as a kid. You must have reacted just as automatically."

Ken remembered a bully he had once encountered himself, at a boarding school he attended briefly during the years before he came to live with the Allens. Richard Holt had removed his son from the school as soon as he heard about it, but even now Ken felt sure he too would have run away if his father hadn't arranged for a transfer to another school.

"Don't you think people would understand why he ran off, if they knew this story?" Ken asked Dewald.

The lawyer looked sober. "I think they would." He was speaking to Bell, not to Ken. "But what I don't think people could understand is why you stayed away-why you completely disappeared. You say your relations with Balfour and with Turney and the rest were excellent. You must have known you could depend on their confidence in you. So why, once the panic had subsided and your mind was working clearly again-why didn't you go back then, Mr. Bell?" The tone was not an accusation. The words were.

Bert looked defensive, and half started out of his chair.

Bell's thin hand gestured him back.

"That's the real payoff question, Mr. Dewald," he said. His voice sounded faint and tired, but his eyes met the lawyer's gaze steadily. "By the time I found myself in Pittsburgh, in that freight car, I fully intended to go back. I wasn't panicky any more. I was astounded at the foolish way I'd behaved-at the sudden reversal to that old childish behavior, after so many years. And then I got hold of a newspaper and read the whole story of the robbery." He paused.

"I read that Rogers and Wright had implicated me, claiming I'd been in on the planning of the thing," he went on slowly. "That didn't surprise me too much. After all, I'd heard them shout my name while the police were trying to subdue them. I'd already accepted the fact that they were going to try to hold me partly responsible for an attempted theft. What did surprise me was to read that a theft had actually taken place-that the vault had been opened and two hundred



thousand dollars' worth of jewelry had disappeared. I knew they hadn't taken it. I knew I hadn't taken it, either. But could I have proved it? Could I?"

Chris Bell's head jerked up from the pillow. A feverish flush stained his cheeks. "The police knew Rogers and Wright had left the store empty-handed. But they knew I'd been there too and had probably been left there alone after the other two ran out. So of course I'd be blamed. It was natural. What else could people think—even Mr. Balfour? They'd all be sure I was guilty. I almost believed it myself. Because, you see, nobody-nobody else—*could* have taken the stuff! It had to be me!"

His head fell back on the pillow. "And that's when I really panicked." His voice was a faint whisper. "That's when I really ran away-and kept on running-and running—"

The whisper died into silence.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SANDY'S SOLUTION

By eleven thirty that morning the *Advance* was off the press. Deliveries had already been made to the newsstands. Great heaps of papers were piled at the back entrance to the shop, waiting for the newsboys who would pick them up as soon as school closed. But feverish activity was still going on in the front office, where hundreds of copies were being readied for mailing to rural subscribers and other readers-some of them living hundreds of miles away-who found Pop's pungent editorials alone worth the price of the paper.

Sandy was running gummed wrappers through a small addressing machine. Ken, Bert, and Maribelle were folding newspapers on the long table standing against the wall, and then enclosing each one in its addressed wrapper. The cartons in which the papers would be taken to the post office were beginning to fill up.

The back door into the shop swung open, letting in the noise of the two smaller presses still at work there, though the big newspaper press was now silent. "Bert!" Pop said, striding in, "what's the print order on that Harrow furniture-store letterhead job? I can't seem to find it."

"Ten thousand letterheads," Bert told him. "And ten thousand envelopes-five thousand large, five thousand small."

"Thanks." Pop went back into the shop again.

The brief exchange was the only conversation that had taken place in the front office for an hour, where Bert and the rest had been working at top speed. But folding and addressing papers was a mechanical job, and Ken knew that the others, like himself, had been worrying over the problem presented by Chris Bell's two apparently conflicting statements: that he himself had not robbed the jewelry-store vault, but that "nobody else could have taken the stuff."

There had been no opportunity at the hospital, earlier that morning, to go into the problem with Chris himself. Dr. Tasker had walked into the room on the heels of Bell's whispered words about running away, and had brusquely ordered the visitors out. "I don't care at the moment about trying to save him from jail!" Tasker had snapped, when Dewald explained why it had been so vital to hear Bell's story and that Bell himself had insisted upon telling it. "Right now, it's more important to save his life. He needs rest, and as his physician, I'm going to see that he gets it."

Dewald had assured Bert and the boys, however, as he separated from them in the hospital lobby, that time wouldn't be wasted even if they could talk to Bell no longer just then. He himself would return to

his office to make a careful study of the court records which Twill had reluctantly turned over to him.

"I don't want to discuss the case right now," he'd added, when Bert asked his opinion of the situation. "I'll know more about what Bell's up against in a couple of hours. Meet me at my office at one thirty, you three. Pop ought to be able to spare you by then."

Ken's own first job when he returned to the office had been to prepare a last-minute story for the *Advance* on Chris Bell. He kept it brief. Actually it said little more than that the magician denied complicity in the four-year-old crime, and that Dewald had been retained to represent him. Pop had boxed the short paragraphs on the front page, alongside the longer and more dramatic headline account of the events leading up to Bell's accident and arrest. The picture accompanying the story was one Sandy had taken the night before. Tasker's eruption into Bell's room that morning had given him no opportunity to take another.

Now, each time Ken folded a paper, the headline on that story stared up at him—a bold, black reminder of the seeming hopelessness of Bell's situation. Bell's words kept echoing in Ken's ears: "Nobody else *could* have taken the stuff. Nobody else ..."

Sandy slid another tray of stencil plates into the addressing machine. "Last one," he announced.

"Good," Ken muttered. He was getting impatient to talk about Bell's case, to try to arrange his confused thoughts in some kind of order.

"Good indeed," Maribelle agreed. "Had breakfast at six this morning—and it's noon."

"I'm hungry!" Pop announced, reappearing from the shop a few minutes later. "Those papers about ready to go to the post office?"

"Almost," Sandy told him.

"Fine. When you and Ken deliver them, you can stop on the way back and pick up some sandwiches and coffee." He found his briar pipe among the clutter on his desk and began to stuff it with tobacco. "Then we can eat lunch here and do a little talking. I gather things don't look any too cheerful to you, Bert, after listening to Bell's story, but no doubt our young masterminds here have already evolved some brilliant solution to the problem."

"I have sort of an idea." Sandy stopped his machine as he made the announcement.

"Get those labels printed," his father told him. "Your idea will wait. The mail train won't."

"But I'm finished, Pop," Sandy assured him.

"Then give the others a hand with the wrapping and get that job done."

Sandy slid the last drawer of stencil plates back into the file and took a place at the table alongside Ken. Five minutes later the two boys were on their way to the post office with the newspapers, and a little after twelve thirty Maribelle Clewes, Ken, and the Allens were seated at their desks, opening paper-wrapped sandwiches and prying up the lids of coffee containers.

"First," Pop said, "give me a quick run-through of what Bell told you."

Bert related the story, succinctly and without emotion. Maribelle gasped several times with sympathy and admiration as he talked, but Pop's face remained impassive.

"Hmm," Pop said, when Bert was finished. "So he said himself, did he-even after insisting he didn't open the vault and take the stuff-that nobody else could have done it? Easy to see what he means, of course. If Turney reached the store within a bare couple of minutes after Bell left, and then the police came along right afterward, and their chief not long after that-Hmm, yes. How *could* anybody else have robbed that vault?"

"But I think I know how-and I think I know who," Sandy said, swallowing the last of his first sandwich at a gulp.

"Of course!" Maribelle gestured triumphantly, and some of the chicken salad filling spilled out of her sandwich. "Turney!"

Pop eyed her quizzically. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Woman's intuition," Maribelle answered.

"Hardly what Dewald would call concrete evidence," Pop said. "All right, Sandy, now let's have yours."

"I think it's Turney too," Sandy said. And when the others stared at him, he hurried on. "At least he had the opportunity, and no one else did, so it must have been Turney."

"And when did this opportunity occur?" Pop demanded.

"The way I figure it, he must have had at least as much time alone in the store as Chris did," Sandy pointed out. "And anybody who thinks Chris had time to open the vault and get away with the stuff inside-well, they'll have to admit Turney did too."

"But-" Bert began.

"Wait a minute, Bert," Sandy broke in. "Let me show you. We know the alarm went off at two forty, and apparently Rogers and Wright tore out of the store within a couple of seconds after that. So how long was Chris alone in the store?" He answered his own question before any of the others could speak. "We know the police car was close by, so let's say the police got to the store-or rather, to the two men they saw running away from it-in two minutes. Give them another two minutes to subdue the men. Turney passed them as they were handcuffing the guys, and ran right on down to the store. It

was empty by the time he got there. Chris had already left. So Chris couldn't have been alone there for more than five minutes, say. Or six at the outside. Right?"

"Nobody's arguing with that," Bert said. "And since he knew the combination, and knew exactly what stuff in the vault was most valuable, he could probably have picked up two hundred thousand dollars' worth and made off with it in five minutes. But the point is that he didn't. So—"

"I know," Sandy interrupted him again. "Let me finish. What I'm saying is that Turney also must have had at least six minutes alone in the store, between the time the cruiser car stopped there and then went on to Bell's house, and the time the police chief arrived. And if Chris could have done it in that time, why couldn't Turney?"

"Hah! Scoff at woman's intuition, will you?" Maribelle demanded of Pop. "Sandy's got it, I tell you!"

"But what earthly reason would Turney have for suddenly deciding to rob the vault?" Bert asked.

"What reason is Chris supposed to have had?" Ken asked him.

"The police thought he had a reason. They think he even helped Rogers and Wright work out the plan," Bert reminded them. "But according to Sandy's theory, if I understand him, Turney must have stolen the stuff on the spur of the moment, just because he found himself alone in the store. But he must have been alone there for hundreds of times during all the years he worked for Balfour. Why should he suddenly, this time, decide to rob the vault?"

Sandy took the defensive. "I haven't figured out everything yet. I just wanted to show you he could have done it."

"And there is a good reason why he might have tried it then," Ken said slowly. Then his voice quickened. "Suppose," he said, "that as he ran past the cops, when they were struggling with Rogers and Wright, he heard that statement about not trusting Bell. He would have believed that Bell was in it somehow. But when he got to the store it was empty. He probably figured Bell had already escaped, even though Turney could see that nothing was stolen. But with Bell already implicated, maybe it suddenly occurred to Turney that he had a ready-made scapegoat. He could steal the stuff himself and blame it on Bell. Even if Bell was caught later, who would believe him when he said he hadn't taken anything—with Turney claiming the vault definitely had been robbed, and with Balfour to back him up when they went over the stuff together? It would have taken quick thinking," Ken admitted. "But if Turney was smart enough—and if he's the kind of man who'd always wanted to rob his employer, but had never dared try it before because he was afraid of being caught—then he could have done it, Bert."

Bert shook his head. "I've got a feeling there's something wrong with the theory," he said. "But if there isn't"-he grinned suddenly at his younger brother and Ken-"if there isn't, and you've hit it, I'll wash your car every Saturday for a year."

"You heard that offer, Maribelle! You heard it too, Pop!" Sandy was grinning too. "Anybody else got a theory? You looked as if you were doing some fancy brooding, Ken, while you were folding papers. Is this what you hit on too?"

Ken shook his head. "I thought there for a while I was getting somewhere on a different tack, but I'm not even going to bring it up now. Compared to your idea, mine's a little on the weird side."

"My, my!" Pop stared at him in mock wonderment. "What's come over you? Never knew you before to have any hesitation about outlining one of your theories just because it was a little weird."

"That's not fair, Pop!" Sandy protested. "Some of Ken's theories that sounded weirdest at first turned out to be right after all!"

"I'm not being modest," Ken assured him. "But we're due at Dewald's office in a couple of minutes, and we might as well get his reaction to your brain child first."

Bert glanced up at the clock and hastily swallowed the last of his coffee. "Right you are. Let's go."

Maribelle was neatly folding up crumbs in her sandwich wrapping. "Mind you," she said, "I'm not going to offer to do any car-washing. But when Sandy's logic and my intuition coincide, I do think we've got something. Though how we could go about proving it four years after it had happened--"

"That bridge is still down the road away," Bert told her. "First we've got to see whether Dewald thinks this idea is even worth looking into. But if we can show him that Chris wasn't the only person who had the opportunity to rob that vault, we'll have accomplished something."

When the boys walked into Dewald's office a few minutes later, on Bert's heels, they found the lawyer still poring over court records. While he motioned to them to pull up chairs around his desk, he told his secretary that he was not to be disturbed for anything short of a desperate emergency.

"All right," he said brusquely to his visitors. "I might as well tell you straight away that these records don't give us any more help than Bell's own story did. Twill's case against him is tight. When Bell said nobody else could have done it, he seems to have summed up the case against himself pretty well."

"But maybe," Sandy said, leaning forward eagerly, "you could build up a case against Turney that would be just as tight."

"Turney!" Dewald stared at him. "What makes you think there

could be *any* case against Turney?"

"Well—" Sandy hesitated. His idea had sounded logical back in the *Advance* office, but in Dewald's presence, it seemed to have lost substance. "Of course we don't know the exact time schedule of the way things happened that night, but—" And then he was rattling off the theory he had worked out, with the addition of Ken's contribution on Turney's sudden realization that Bell could be used as a scapegoat.

Dewald listened closely. "I see," he said slowly, when Sandy was finished. "Yes, it says here in the court records somewhere that Grale—that's the Hilldale chief—reached the store at 2:55. So presumably Turney had perhaps eight minutes alone in the store before Grale arrived."

"And if Twill thinks Bell could have robbed the vault in about six minutes," Sandy said, "why couldn't Turney have done it in eight? He knew the combination too. And he—"

Dewald was speaking. "But what did he do with the stuff?" he asked quietly.

"What?" Sandy asked blankly.

"What did he do with the stuff?" Dewald repeated. "I grant you he had enough time to remove it from the vault. But he was wearing—" leafing through the papers on his desk as he spoke, he stopped when he had found what he was searching for—"he was wearing pajamas and an overcoat. He could not possibly have carried away two hundred thousand dollars' worth of watches and jewelry in two overcoat pockets plus the pocket he may have had in his pajamas.

"I'm afraid you've missed the chief point of the case against Bell," Dewald added. "He not only had time to remove the stuff from the vault. He disappeared afterward—and so did the jewelry. Turney did not disappear. Turney could not possibly have had the stuff on him when he eventually did leave the store, in the company of Balfour and the police. So building up a case on the time element is, I'm afraid, of no value at all."

Sandy's face was red, but he had recovered from the first chagrin he showed over Dewald's statement. The moment Dewald stopped talking, Sandy said, "But Turney could have hidden the stuff somewhere outside the store! In an ash can! Or anywhere! Then he could have come back later and picked it up."

Dewald was shaking his head. "Let me read you one paragraph of Grale's statement," he said, bending over his desk. "Here it is.

" 'Although it seemed clear that Rogers and Wright had had no opportunity to rifle the vault, I decided to make sure that they hadn't managed to do so, and then hide the stolen goods somewhere in the neighborhood before running toward their car which was parked some two blocks away on Maple Street. After the two criminals had been

locked up, Patrolmen Worden and myself spent two hours searching the vicinity of the store and the route which the men took toward their car. Particular attention was paid to the alley next to the store, and to all ash cans or other containers that might have afforded a temporary hiding place for the stolen goods. Nothing was found that night, or during a more extensive search made as soon as it had grown light in the morning. I also requested the postmaster to open the nearby mailboxes in my presence, to determine whether the stolen goods had been abandoned in one of them. He complied, but nothing was found. I am entirely satisfied that the stolen goods were not left in the vicinity of the store that night.”

Bert lowered his head into his hands. “I had a feeling there was something wrong with the idea,” he muttered. “But it would have been great if-” His voice trailed off.

“No, Sandy,” Dewald said slowly. “If we’re going to accept Bell’s story-all of it but that statement to the effect that nobody but himself *could* have taken the stuff-I realize as well as you do that we must then get some lead as to the real culprit. But I’m afraid Turney isn’t the man.”



## CHAPTER IX

### KEN'S THEORY

"Well, that's that," Bert said glumly. "And if Turney isn't the man, we're right back where we started-with no lead at all."

"At least, Bert, now you don't have to wash our car for all those Saturdays." But even Sandy knew that at the moment Bert couldn't be cheered by a feeble joke. He himself was looking almost as depressed as his older brother. Then suddenly he straightened up and turned on Ken. "What about that weird theory of yours?"

"You have a theory too, Ken?" Dewald's voice was polite but skeptical.

"It's a pretty farfetched one," Ken told him. "I can't even make it sound very convincing to myself."

"Let's hear it anyway, Ken." Bert had looked up. "Heaven knows this whole situation is weird. Any theory that explains it would have to be weird too."

"Well," Ken said hesitantly, "it's just that I got to thinking about the time that elapsed between the nine-thirty closing of the store and the sounding of the burglar alarm at two forty. And it occurred to me that the place could have been robbed twice-or twenty times, for that matter-during that five-hour period. A robbery committed then would explain why stuff was gone from the vault even if Bell didn't open it."

Sandy and Bert were still staring at him, puzzled and amazed, when Dewald said, "Well! That's a fresh idea! I didn't see anything in the records to indicate that such a possibility had even been considered."

"Wait a minute!" Sandy demanded. "Are you actually suggesting, Ken, that just by accident-just by coincidence-two separate attempts were made to rob the store that night, and that it was the first one that succeeded? Because I've got to admit, my friend-much as I'm usually impressed by your mental gymnastics-that it sounds a little too weird even for me. And I can't see a jury listening to it for two minutes."

"Coincidences do sometimes happen, Sandy," Dewald said mildly.

"I wasn't thinking of it as a coincidence," Ken replied. "I--"

"But, Ken," Sandy protested, "it would be the most colossal coincidence in the world if--"

"Not if they were both planned by the same person, Sandy," Ken broke in. "Then it wouldn't be a coincidence at all. Then it would be a deliberate attempt to confuse."

"Both planned by the same person?" Bert ran a hand through his

red hair. "I'm afraid I'm not getting this. Start at the beginning, Ken. Give it to us slowly."

Ken glanced at Dewald. The lawyer nodded encouragement.

"All right," Ken said. "This is the idea. Somebody -Mr. X, let's call him-decides to try to rob the Balfour vault and get away without being caught. So he plans, first, to establish a watertight alibi for the time of the crime; and, second, to point the finger of suspicion away from himself. For both these reasons he needs help, and the accomplices he chooses are Rogers and Wright.

"He works his alibi like this," Ken continued. "He goes to the store at, say, eleven o'clock at night, robs the vault, locks the door behind himself when he leaves, and hides the jewelry somewhere. Then he stays in the presence of unimpeachable witnesses. He's with them at two forty, when the theft appears to take place."

When Ken paused for breath, Sandy picked up one of his phrases and repeated it on a questioning note. "Locks the door when he leaves? Then Mr. X has a key to the store?"

"He'd have to have one," Ken said. "He'd also have to have the vault combination. Maybe he had both those things all along-as Turney did, for example. Or maybe he just managed to borrow or steal a key long enough to have a duplicate made, and learned the vault combination by some other piece of trickery. The point is that he must have been able to get into the store and rob the vault without leaving any evidence of his theft behind. His accomplices leave the evidence when they appear to do the stealing later, and their evidence points to the guilt of somebody who *didn't* have a key to the store and *didn't* know the combination."

"What kind of evidence?" Sandy wanted to know.

"Chris Bell himself."

"What!"

Ken nodded. "If Rogers and Wright had bound and gagged Chris when they left the store-and for all we know that's what they planned to do-then everything would have worked out perfectly for Mr. X, according to my theory. Bell's story would have left X entirely in the clear. Bell would have told the police the time of the crime-a time when X was safely alibied. And Bell would have described the thieves as men who needed to kidnap him in order to get into the store and into the vault. If X were Turney, for example, that part of Bell's story would be particularly important. In any case, Mr. X would be sitting on top of the world. He'd have the jewelry. All he'd have to do would be to use a little of it to pay off his hirelings, and the rest would be his. He'd never be suspected at all."

"Wow!" Sandy said softly when Ken stopped. "Weird is certainly the word for it! But I suppose if you figured out a crazy scheme like

that, somebody else could too. Only how would X go about hiring a couple of thugs to perform that little sleight of hand for him at two forty?"

Ken grinned. "I haven't worked out all the details yet."

"But would a couple of competent burglars be willing to accept a job like that?" Bert wanted to know. "If they were going to risk their necks breaking into a store-whether they used Bell to help them or not-why wouldn't they want to do it on their own and get all the loot instead of just part of it?"

Dewald, silent until then, replied to Bert's question instead of voicing an opinion on Ken's whole theory. "There's a ready answer to that, Bert," he said. "If they were to be paid in cash, the proposition might be to their advantage. It would save them the problem of disposing of the stolen goods through a fence, thereby losing a great part of its value and running an additional risk of capture. If they were offered the chance to do the job for twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, for example, I should think they would find the proposition quite attractive."

Ken was looking at Dewald with surprise. "Then you think it's possible the thing may have been done that way? You're actually taking this weird idea seriously?"

"I'll take anything seriously that shows the slightest chance of helping my client," the lawyer said. "I grant you the theory is-well, complex, shall we say? But I'm not prepared to rule it out as utterly impossible."

Bert sat forward with new energy. "All right. Then let's say Ken's theory is logical as a theory. How does it fit in with what actually happened that night? You're not suggesting, Ken, that when Bell set off the burglar alarm that night he was acting out part of some master plan?"

"Of course not!" Ken said quickly. "I think he wrecked X's plan by setting off that alarm. When Rogers and Wright heard it they must have forgotten all about X and his alibi, and decided to concentrate on saving their own necks. They probably figured the whole scheme had gone wrong, and that they had to get away before they were caught."

"But they were caught," Sandy reminded him. "And they mentioned Bell's name. Does that fit in?"

"It could," Bert said, "and for the very reason they gave. They might have been yelling about Chris, just as they said, because they were so furious at him."

"But by the next day, when they'd had time to calm down and figure out their smartest move, they were still talking about Bell, even claiming he'd help plan the robbery," Sandy pointed out. "But if they were really working for somebody called X, why didn't they bring him

into it, and let him take most of the blame?"

Nobody answered him for a moment.

Then Ken said, "I've got it, I think. Look, they knew they were up for a jail term in any case. They couldn't avoid that, once they'd been caught. But by the next day they knew about Bell's disappearance, and decided to take advantage of it. By running off, Bell had played right into their hands-had made himself look guilty of the actual theft. So Rogers and Wright must have figured that if they protected X, they would be protecting their own future. Then, when they got out of jail, they'd have a hold over him that would be worth money."

Dewald was nodding. "Very interesting," he murmured. "At least it suggests an explanation of why Rogers and Wright lied about Bell's role. Those lies have been among the most puzzling aspects of the case."

"But suppose Bell had turned up in a couple of days-either because he was caught or because he deliberately came back and told his own story?" Sandy asked. "Then how would their scheme have worked?"

"Even then," Ken pointed out, "it would have been his word against theirs. There wouldn't seem to be any logical reason why Rogers and Wright would lie about Bell, since they were caught already and it couldn't do them any good. But Bell would appear to have plenty of reason to lie, in an effort to keep out of jail. After all, once he'd disappeared, how could he actually prove he hadn't taken the stuff with him and hidden it somewhere?"

"Very interesting," Dewald said again. "I really believe your weird theory fits all the circumstances, Ken."

Bert was grinning. "If you think it's worth working on, I'll certainly go along with it, sir." He turned to Ken. "Now, if you'll just tell us who X is, I'll reinstate that car-washing offer."

"At least we know it can't be Turney," Sandy said.

Ken raised his eyebrows at him in mock amazement. "What would Maribelle think if she heard you say that?"

"Maribelle and I are both going to have to face the fact that for once we were wrong," Sandy admitted. "Seriously, though, how could it be Turney? By the time he got to the store he knew Rogers and Wright were caught-he'd passed them when they were struggling with the cops. So if he were X, he'd figure his scheme had gone wrong and that his only hope was to cover up. He'd probably pretend that nothing was missing from the vault, and hope to put back the stuff he'd taken before it was missed. But Turney said right out that the stuff was gone. And to my mind that proves he couldn't have been X."

"Good point, Sandy," Bert commented.

"Not conclusive, though," Dewald pointed out. "If Turney heard the men shouting about Bell, and then found that Bell had

disappeared, the picture changes. In that case, if he was X, he would have realized that Bell could be used as a scapegoat for the theft, and Turney would have reported it immediately, just as he did."

Ken nodded. "That's what I was thinking. Though I suppose Balfour might have been X too."

"Balfour!" Bert repeated, startled. "But why would he steal stuff out of his own store?"

"To collect the insurance on it, maybe," Ken said. "He wouldn't even have to dispose of the jewelry. He could slip it back into his stock, and sell it, a little at a time—having already been paid for it once by the insurance company."

"But anybody who worked at the store might have been able to get a duplicate key, and learn *the* vault combination by watching the vault opened often enough," Bert pointed out.

"You're right, Bert," Dewald said. "And that means," he added slowly, placing the tips of his fingers together and looking over his tented hands at Ken and the two Allens, "that means that we're going to have to look into the alibis of Balfour and everybody who worked for him. We'll have to check on all of them, from the time the store closed that night until the time the alarm rang. We've also got to find out just how much checking the insurance company did. Maybe something its detectives found out will be helpful to us."

"I could try to get hold of the insurance company's records first thing tomorrow," Bert offered.

"Good," Dewald agreed. "Of course we could hire an investigating staff for this job, but if you three are willing to do some of the preliminary digging, so much the better."

"If you'd trust us to tackle it," Ken said tentatively, "Sandy and I could go to Hilldale, pretending we wanted to collect background material for a story on Bell and the crime. Maybe that way we could talk to Balfour and his employees about what they remember of that evening, and at least eliminate some of them as suspects without arousing suspicion."

Dewald looked questioningly at Bert.

"Sure," Bert said. "I may not always admit it, but they're pretty good at that sort of thing—if they can manage to stay out of trouble."

"We'll be careful!" Sandy said quickly.

"It will be most important for you to exercise every caution," Dewald said earnestly, "not only for your own sakes, but also because no one must have any idea of what you're after. If we're going to be able to shoot a few holes in Twill's case against Bell, when he brings it into court, we don't want Twill to know ahead of time about any ammunition we have on hand. It might be wise if Andy Kane were asked to call the Hilldale police before you go up there. He could ease

the way for a couple of reporters doing a story on the case.”

Bert nodded. “I’ll get Pop to do that.”

“Good. And now,” Dewald said, “I’d suggest you all spend some time going over these court records, so you’ll be completely familiar with all the aspects of the case.”

Bert and the boys barely had a chance to brief Pop on their conversation with Dewald when they all met again at home late that afternoon. Mom took over the floor from the moment she called them to the table.

“I saw *Chris Bell*,” she announced, as they sat down to one of her savory pot roasts.

“You don’t expect us to be surprised, do you, Mom?” Sandy asked.

“I just hope you remembered,” Pop remarked, “that the hospital does have a kitchen. It really won’t be necessary for you to take Bell all his meals every day.”

Mom ignored the teasing. “I know perfectly well the hospital has a kitchen, but I make the best beef broth in town, if I do say it myself. So I took along a bowl of it, and some white grapes, and a few flowers. Of course I only stayed a few minutes. Poor young man! With you folks and lawyers and all talking at him the whole morning, I could see he needed rest.”

“So naturally you didn’t tire him at all—didn’t ask him a single question.” Pop grinned at her.

“Of course not,” Mom said indignantly. “But he did talk a bit about how he’d become Magnus the Magician.”

“Really?”

Suddenly they were all looking at her with lively curiosity.

“Well, tell us, Mom,” Bert demanded. “We didn’t have time to learn anything about the four-year gap after he left Hilldale.”

“Well, it was all quite simple, the way he told it. He said he’d moved right on south from Pittsburgh—perhaps you know he rode there in an empty freight car that night?”

They nodded, grinning to themselves at the casual manner with which Mom referred to that rather unorthodox means of travel.

“But he had just one week’s pay in his pocket when he got there,” Mom went on, “and he decided his money would last longer in a warm climate. I do think that was clever of him. So he—Oh, did I say he was using the name Edmond Albert by then? Ken, why didn’t you take more potatoes?”

“I’ve got plenty, Mom,” Ken assured her. “Go on about Bell.”

“Well, he had all sorts of odd jobs on his way south, and finally in Florida he became a sort of handyman with a circus wintering there. That’s when he met a magician, an elderly man, who called himself Magnus. Chris learned some of his tricks, and became sort of an

assistant in the act when the original Magnus went out on his own the next season. Last year Chris took over the act and the equipment and the name-all of it-because his friend wasn't able to work any more. They still share the money Chris makes. Isn't that fine of him-to send money regularly to his old friend? And now," Mom concluded firmly, "I'd like to know exactly what you are going to do to help that poor young man."

"You tell her, Ken," Sandy said. "After all, it's your theory."

Mom listened intently as Ken talked. The others broke in occasionally with remarks and additions. They were still discussing the theory, and how they would explore its possibilities, when they reached the chocolate cake Mom produced for dessert.

"I think it's brilliant," Mom said at last, pouring coffee. "And I just know you're going to prove his innocence."

"You know," Bert said, with a great relieved sigh, "I'm beginning to think we really are!"

# CHAPTER X

## KEN ADMITS DEFEAT

It was late the following afternoon when Sandy finally nosed the convertible over the crest of a hill and the clustered lights of a town in the valley below came into view.

"That's Hilldale, I guess," he said.

"Must be," Ken agreed. "We might as well take a room right away. Then we'll decide whether we'll be able to accomplish much of anything tonight."

When the boys had left Brentwood that morning they had hoped to reach their destination by mid-afternoon, so that they would be able to phone home some sort of preliminary report by evening. But the convertible's fuel pump had gone bad midway along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and they had been forced to dawdle impatiently at a highway garage for several hours until a new one had been installed. Now the dashboard clock showed well past six.

Sandy reduced speed as he reached the foot of the hill and turned into Hilldale's wide, brightly lighted Main Street. They had already agreed that even if the town boasted several hotels, they would stay at the Hilldale, where Chet Rogers and Pete Wright had spent several critical days four years before.

"There it is," Ken said, gesturing ahead.

Sandy shifted his foot to the brake. "Balfour's store should be just this side of it. There's nothing but an alley between the two buildings, is there?"

"That's right."

Then Sandy was pulling up in front of the neat red-brick hotel. The boys got out, a little stiff from their long drive, and stood looking at the jewelry store beyond the narrow passageway. Only a dim night light showed behind its two handsome windows, with their velvet-backed displays of silver tableware and jewelry.

"Closed," Sandy said discouragedly. "Too late to talk to anybody now."

"But the police station will still be open," Ken reminded him. "And we wanted to go there first, anyway. Come on."

Five minutes later they had signed the hotel register, taken their bags upstairs, and come down again. From a competent and incurious clerk they learned that police headquarters was only a block away, around the corner of the nearest cross street, and they started out for it on foot through the crisp September evening.

"You will notice that I am nobly refraining from suggesting that we



pause on the way for three or four hamburgers, or some other slight snack,” Sandy said. “So the next time you complain that I think of nothing but my stomach, remember this moment.”

“I never accused you of that,” Ken protested. “It’s what goes into your stomach-or what you wish were going into it-that you think about all the time.”

“I could easily think of a crushing retort to that baseless slander,” Sandy told him haughtily, “*but* there isn’t time. Those two green lights on the left mean the police station.”

A door flanked by the green lights Sandy had indicated led into the entrance hall of what had obviously once been a private house. The hallway itself was empty when the boys entered, but a room to the right was visible through another door, and they could see a man behind the desk in that room rising to his feet.

“You the two young men from Brentwood?” he called to them. “I’m Chief Grale,” he said, extending his hand. “Come on in. Chief Kane telephoned me this morning. Understand you’re writing some sort of story on the Bell case.”

“A kind of background story,” Ken explained.

“Well, here’s all we’ve got on it, right here.” Grale handed over a big Manila folder. His voice was brusque, and he hadn’t smiled at them. “You understand I’m not giving you permission to quote directly from any of that stuff. You can read it, for your information, since Kane vouched for you. But if you need any quotes for your story I’ll give them to you personally. Use that table there in the corner if you like,” he added.

“Thanks very much,” Ken said, and Sandy murmured, “We certainly appreciate this.”

They exchanged a quick glance as they sat down at two of the straight chairs drawn up around the table. Grale was trying to be polite, they realized, but he was clearly not too happy over the reopening of the Bell case. It probably gave him no pleasure to remember that he himself had once promised the early capture of a man who had since eluded the police for four years.

The boys went through the police records quickly, aware as they read that they were learning nothing new. Within half an hour they had reached the last sheaf of papers in the folder, a dozen closely typed pages headed: allied surety company-confidential report; Balfour’s jewelry-store theft, Hilldale, PA. With renewed interest they began to read its terse, clipped sentences, suddenly hopeful of finding some new fact to add to their meager store. They knew the thoroughness with which insurance investigators worked.

The first pages of the report merely summarized the police investigations, but the heading at the top of page eight caused Ken to

catch his breath. It read collusion possibilities explored. Swiftly they raced through the typewritten lines below it:

Notwithstanding the apparent guilt of Christopher Bell, I investigated the possibility that the entry into the store at approximately 2:40 a.m. was not planned as a robbery at all, but was merely a ruse to cover up an actual theft which had taken place earlier. This possibility, of course, would depend on collusion between Rogers and Wright and some unknown person, and upon the possession by said unknown of a key to the store and the vault combination, to permit his robbery of the vault without setting off the alarm. Balfour and Turney were the obvious suspects for this role, but any employee of the store might have obtained said key and said vault combination. The whereabouts of Balfour and all his employees (with the exception of Bell) for the hours between 9:30 p.m. and 2:40 a.m. on the night of the robbery were therefore checked.

The fact that many of them attended a dance at the local Community House that evening facilitated this process. As will be seen in the detailed list attached below, the following were present at that dance until 2 a.m.: Joe Wentzell, Ethel Burns, Alex Klaus, Tim Stanley.

Grace Lyons, clerk, did not attend the dance, but can satisfactorily account for the entire period except the forty-five minutes between 9:00 and 9:45. She claims to have spent the time window-shopping, and this statement cannot be verified. But, in my opinion, this gap is inconsequential since the Balfours, Turney, and Bell remained in the store until 9:30, and entry would probably not have been attempted so soon after their departure, when there were still many people on the street.

Balfour and Turney alibi each other from 9:30 until 11:00, as will be seen in detail below. (Turney accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Balfour to their home and remained there for that period.)

Mrs. Balfour's gastric attack shortly after 11:00, and the presence of a doctor in their home for some time thereafter, are the major points in Balfour's alibi for the hours from 11 to 2:40.

Turney's alibi for the period from 11:00 on depends upon his landlady, who was waiting for the return of her daughter from the above-mentioned dance. She claims Turney entered his room at 11:10 and did not leave it thereafter.

Conclusion: In view of my investigation, I conclude that none of the suspects could have entered the store between 9:30 and 2:40, and that the possibility of collusion is thereby eliminated.

Ken's face was grim as he turned the next sheet and read through the detailed alibis which the investigator, Harry Land, had collected. Minute by minute, Land had accounted for the way in which Mr. Balfour and his employees spent the crucial hours.

Land's final summary, expressed in unequivocal terms, appeared on the last page:

I have no doubt, therefore, that the premises were entered only once, at approximately 2:40, as claimed by Rogers and Wright, and that Bell opened the vault during the five-to-seven-minute period during which he was alone in the store.

I recommend that Balfour's claim be paid, and that a reward be offered for Bell's apprehension.

"Well, that's that," Ken said under his breath. "There goes my theory."

Grale's voice from the other side of the room startled them. "Were you speaking to me?"

"Let's get out of here," Sandy whispered.

Ken closed the folder and rose to his feet. With an effort he summoned polite phrases of thanks to the Hilldale police chief as he laid the folder on the stocky man's desk.

"You didn't want to make any notes from this stuff? Or get a statement from me about it?" Grale asked, puzzled.

"We'd rather do that later on," Ken told him, aware as he spoke how lame the words sounded. "We thought we'd just get a general picture of the situation first. So if it's agreeable to you—"

They were out on the sidewalk finally, aware that Grale was puzzled by their attitude but unable to give much attention to that fact. There was room in their thoughts for only one thing: the knowledge that the insurance company's investigation had destroyed the feasibility of Ken's theory-and, with it, their only hope of clearing Christopher Bell.

Neither of them spoke as they walked the short half block to Main Street and turned in the direction of the hotel. As they approached a lighted restaurant, Sandy said, "Look, we'll think better if we have something to eat."

Ken wasn't hungry. He suspected that Sandy himself wasn't hungry at the moment. But the brisk schedule of checking and interviews which they had intended to follow in Hilldale now seemed useless in view of what they had learned. "We might as well eat," Ken said. "I can't think of anything else to do." He pushed open the restaurant door and Sandy followed him inside.

In a kind of numb despair they let themselves be led to a table, accepted menus which they scarcely looked at, and gave their orders. They waited in silence until their food was served and ate in silence until their plates were almost empty.

"Well," Ken said finally, "we've had something to eat, and I'm not thinking any better than I was. Which certainly isn't saying much. That was a great idea I had, that theory!"

“It was such a good idea that an experienced insurance investigator thought it was worth looking into,” Sandy pointed out. “If you’re going to start acting like Bert, wasting time blaming yourself for-“

“I’m not wasting it,” Ken broke in angrily. “What else have we got to do with our time?” Then he seemed to hear his own voice. “Sorry,” he said. “But I can’t think of anything else to do, can you?”

Sandy grinned away the apology. “No, I can’t,” he admitted. “I don’t suppose there’s any point in our interviewing the Balfour staff, unless you think there’s a chance that Land slipped up.”

Ken shook his head. “Allied is a big company. It can afford to hire the best men in the business.”

“Bert was going to check with the insurance company today,” Sandy said thoughtfully. “He probably read the same report we did. Do you suppose we ought to phone and talk it over with him?”

“What good would it do?” Ken asked. “On the chance that he hasn’t seen the report yet, why don’t we wait and break the bad news to them tomorrow when we get home?”

“All right.” Sandy was no more eager than Ken to report the collapse of their high hopes. “So we leave in the morning?”

“Might as well. Unless-” Ken hesitated.

“Unless what?”

“Well, I was thinking maybe we ought to talk to Balfour while we’re here. Not,” Ken added quickly, “because I still think of him as a likely suspect. But Balfour always claimed he didn’t think Chris had done it, and I thought maybe Chris would like us to see him.”

Sandy nodded. “I think he would. That’s a good idea.”

Ken was getting up, peering around for a telephone. “I’ll try to call him right now. Maybe we can see him tonight.”

When he returned from the restaurant’s phone booth a few minutes later he looked slightly more cheerful. “He wants to know how Chris is and wants to hear the whole story. And the sooner the better. Sounds very concerned about him and says his wife is too.”

The directions Balfour had given Ken were easy to follow. When the boys drew up before a low white house set among tree-shaded lawns, Balfour himself was waiting to greet them on the threshold. He wore garden-stained slacks and a worn tweed jacket, and the briar in his hand reminded the boys of Pop Allen’s favorite pipe. After a quick warm handshake he led them directly into a comfortable study where a friendly fire blazed on the hearth.

“Mary,” he told the slender gray-haired woman sitting beside it, “these are the young men from Brentwood.”

“You’re good to come,” she said quietly. “We wanted to call the hospital as soon as we heard, but we weren’t sure it would be the best

thing for Chris.”

For half an hour Ken and Sandy answered the Balfour’s eager questions.

“We’ve been in touch with Twill today, of course,” the jeweler explained, in apology for their numerous queries. “But he thinks Chris is guilty, so naturally his report on the boy wasn’t too sympathetic.”

“And you don’t think Chris robbed your vault, Mr. Balfour?” Ken finally managed to ask.

“Of course we don’t,” the man said firmly. “But I know insurance company investigators are highly skilled. And even if we thought the police accepted Chris’s guilt a little too readily, we had to face the fact that if the company hadn’t felt mighty sure of itself, it wouldn’t have reimbursed us for the loss. Under the circumstances-and with Chris gone-our claims about his innocence carried no weight. There was just nothing we could do!”

“But now that we know where he is, we can at least get in touch with him again,” Mrs. Balfour said. “We’ll write him tonight-both of us. We want to help in any way we can.”

Ken suddenly took new hope from their warm sympathy. “Then would you mind going over that whole day for us, as you remember it?” he asked. “Maybe there’s something-some little thing-that everybody missed at the time.”

But Balfour’s meticulous version of that fateful December eleventh, and the morning hours of the following day, told them nothing they hadn’t known before.

Balfour shook his head when he saw their disappointment. “It doesn’t help, does it?” he murmured. “Nothing seems to help. However, if you think it would be useful to talk to the staff, I’d be glad to arrange details for you. Grace Lyons, one of our clerks then, has left us since to get married, but I can give you her address and call her to make an appointment. And I can tell you where you’ll find Jim Turney these days.”

“You mean Turney’s not with you any longer?” Sandy asked.

“You didn’t know?” Balfour smiled. “His departure was such an event for us that I guess I just took for granted the whole world knew about it. We miss him, naturally,” he added. “But we understood. We’d have been glad to get away ourselves after that miserable business about Chris.”

Ken looked puzzled. “That’s why he left?”

“We think it must have been,” Balfour explained, “because he’d always talked as if he meant to remain with us until his retirement. Why, he’d been our one real standby until Chris came along. But when he finally decided Chris was guilty, I think it hurt him so deeply he didn’t want to go on here.”

"He'd worked so closely with the boy," Mrs. Balfour murmured. "They thought the world of each other."

"They did." Her husband nodded. "Remember, Mary, how the very night it happened the three of us sat talking about what a fine manager Chris would make for the business when we all retired? Not that Jim would have retired quite so soon as we did," he added to the boys. "He's younger than we are, though not a youngster like Chris, of course. So it was a comfort to all of us to think of Chris as able to take over eventually."

"But Jim seemed to lose heart after Chris left," Mrs. Balfour said sadly. "He began to seem unhappy and restless, and then after a time he said he felt he needed a complete change. We urged him to take a vacation and he finally agreed." She gave a small wry smile. "And that's when it happened."

"He went up to this Wanaka place to fish," Mr. Balfour explained. "While he was there he heard the motel was in need of a manager, and he applied for the job. Came back here just long enough to resign." He shook his head. "We argued with him, of course. Urged him to stay with us at least a few more years, until he was due for a pension. But he'd made up his mind. It was a shock to us, I can tell you."

"But, as my husband says, we did understand in a way," his wife added.

"Oh, yes," Balfour agreed. "And the motel is a nice place. Wanaka's about forty-five miles from here-in pretty country too. Sometimes I've thought of asking him to take me on as an assistant," he added with a slight smile. "But I guess I'm too old to change."

Ken and Sandy left the pleasant study not long afterward, their spirits even lower than when they had arrived. By mutual agreement they headed straight for the hotel and bed.

The desk clerk, cool and impersonal as before, handed them a small slip of paper with their key. On the paper was a message requesting them to ask for Operator 9 when they were ready to take a call for Brentwood.

Unwillingly they headed for the phone booth. Ken picked up the receiver and Sandy leaned against the open doorway. Within a few minutes Pop Allen was on the other end of the wire.

Sandy could interpret Ken's "Oh, so Bert saw the report too, did he?" But after that he could make little sense out of Ken's brief remarks, except for those describing the visit to the Balfours.

"What's up?" Sandy asked when Ken put the receiver in place. "From the look of your face it must be bad-but how can it be any worse than it is already?"

Ken didn't answer him until they were upstairs in their room, with

the door shut behind them.

"Bert's seen the report too-I heard that much," Sandy prompted.

Ken nodded. "And he went over all the alibis with Land himself. There's no chance of a loophole there. Bert says Land obviously knows his business."

"Bert saw him in New York?"

"In Brentwood. Land came to see Chris this afternoon. Interviewed him for two hours." Ken slumped in a chair. "Dewald was there- nothing went on that wasn't legal. But Pop says Land didn't believe Chris's story at all-that he spent most of the time urging him to return any part of the stolen goods he hadn't already gotten rid of. Chris kept denying he'd ever had the stuff, of course. But Land's last words were that when Chris changed his mind and decided to tell the truth, he should get in touch with him. He said he could be reached at Turney's place in Wanaka tonight, or here in Hilldale tomorrow. That's how sure he is of himself."

"Why is he going to see Turney, and then come here?"

"To go over the witnesses' stories with them, I gathered. He probably wants to refresh their memories, so that when Chris comes to trial none of them will accidentally say a good word for him. I suppose insurance companies always like to see a thief get the maximum penalty," Ken added grimly.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet. "Let's get out of here, shall we? Can you see any earthly reason for hanging around Hilldale?"

Sandy looked surprised for a moment and then shook his head.

"No, I guess I can't."

"I'm certainly not going to write a chatty story about The Day Christopher Bell Robbed His Employer, and if we're still here in the morning, I'm going to have to go on with that farce. If you're too tired to drive, I'll take the wheel. It's not nine o'clock yet. If we don't have any more trouble with the car, it shouldn't be more than a couple of hours past midnight when we get home."

"What are we waiting for?" Sandy had picked up their bag and was already at the door.

The hotel clerk really looked at them for the first time when they announced that they wanted their bill. He seemed utterly dumfounded at the thought of people paying for a room and not using it.

"That's the only thing we accomplished all day," Ken muttered, as he slid under the wheel of the convertible. "We actually proved that guy is human after all."

# CHAPTER XI

## A NEW RAY OF HOPE

They drove for nearly an hour in silence. Sandy reached out and flicked on the radio once, and then immediately turned it off again.

Ken remembered the four miserable hours Chris Bell had spent in the car of Rogers and Wright, and his description of them playing the radio to kill time. He wondered if the same thought had occurred to Sandy.

"We haven't gone forty miles yet," Ken said suddenly. "If you've thought of anything we can do in Hilddale-anything at all-just say the word and we'll turn back."

"I haven't thought of a thing," Sandy muttered. A moment later he asked, "You still believe Chris Bell is innocent?"

"Yes," Ken told him shortly.

"So do I. I almost wish I were like poor Turney, and could give up the idea. But I can't." He glared ahead into the path of the headlights over his crossed arms. "And yet there's nothing we can do to prove he's innocent! Nothing! So Chris is going to jail, just because a couple of smart crooks dealt out a parcel of lies that registered with a small-town police force!"

The car rocked suddenly as Ken jammed on the brake, and then slithered off onto the shoulder just short of a crossroads.

"What happened?" Sandy, thrown forward toward the windshield, hauled himself back into place.

"What was that you said?" Ken was shouting. But before Sandy could answer, Ken was pounding the redhead's knee. "You've hit it! I bet you've hit it! Now we can really do something!"

Sandy grabbed the pounding fist and held it still. "What are you talking about? I thought we were piling up and you-! Have you gone crazy?" The fist was still jerking rhythmically in his hand. "Stop it!" Sandy shouted. "And tell me what you mean by I 'hit it.' I didn't say anything!"

"Oh, yes, you did!" Ken turned sideways to face him. In the glow from the dashboard his face was alive, his eyes bright. "You just explained how you and Maribelle were right in the first place!"

"How-I" Sandy stared. "You mean Turney?"

"I mean Turney."

Sandy groaned. "And I thought you really had something! We *know* it can't be Turney! It's been proved that-"

"But what was proved?" Ken broke in. "Sure, it was proved he had an alibi for the whole evening right up to the ringing of the alarm.



And it was proved that he couldn't have taken the stuff with him when he left the store that night after it was all over-and that he couldn't have hidden it anywhere in the neighborhood to be picked up later."

"Well? What other proof do you need?"

"But suppose he didn't take the stuff away that night at all? Suppose he left it right in the store until the next day? No-the next day was Sunday," Ken corrected himself. "Until Monday, then."

"I don't get it," Sandy said flatly. "You mean he left it in the vault, and Balfour just didn't notice it was there when they checked over the stock together? Of course, it was only two hundred thousand dollars' worth." Sandy's tone was scathing. "Easy enough to overlook, naturally. Or maybe you think he spread it out in the show window, where of course nobody could see it."

Ken grinned. "You're almost right. He was about as obvious as that. Just remember that Turney was in charge of the store's mail-order business, and you'll see what I'm getting at."

"Mail-!"

"Exactly! He dumped the stuff in a carton, wrapped it up, and mailed the parcel to himself whenever it was convenient. It was when you said the words *parcel* and *registered*-something about a parcel of lies registering with the police-that I suddenly got it. Or are parcels insured when they're valuable? I guess it's only first-class mail that's registered. Anyway, I bet that's how he did it!"

"Wow!" Sandy said softly. Now his eyes were as bright as Ken's. "Wow!" Then he sobered. "But could it have been that simple? Wouldn't a carton have been noticed when-No," he broke off. "I remember now. Chris said he and Turney had been wrapping packages all day, right up until six o'clock when they had to help in the front of the store. So even if they'd mailed part of the stuff earlier, the packages they'd done late that afternoon probably would be held over until Monday."

Ken nodded. "That's the way I figured. And Turney probably used a fake name on the label, and addressed it care of general delivery at some town fairly near Hilldale. Then all he had to do was drive over several days later and pick it up."

"If the package was registered, or insured, or whatever you call it," Sandy said, "he'd have had to sign for it. But--"

"But that would have been no problem," Ken finished for him. "He'd simply sign the name he'd invented-the one he wrote on the label-and offer a faked letter as identification."

For a moment they were silent, both staring blankly at the closed and darkened gas station at the crossroads just beyond them, while they searched their minds for possible flaws in the idea that had

completely changed their outlook within a few moments.

"Turney would have had time to do it," Ken pointed out. "He was used to wrapping stuff. He must have been fast at it."

"Right. Of course," Sandy said slowly, "there was a chance that the police would have opened all those packages that night, just to check on this very possibility."

"So? In that case Turney would have lost the loot."

"And gone to jail," Sandy reminded him. "If the label on the package was in his handwriting, they'd know he'd wrapped it up."

"He probably typed the label-either that night or Monday morning," Ken said. "And in that case they wouldn't be able to prove who did it. But there's a tougher problem than that-the same one Bert pointed out when you first mentioned Turney as a suspect. Why would the man rob a store where he'd worked all that time? You see, even if we can figure out the mechanical angles-and I think we can-we still have no idea why he'd do such a thing. And without a motive-"

"But didn't you think up an answer to that once?" Sandy interrupted. "Something about Turney having always wanted to rob the place, maybe, and just realizing on the spur of the moment that he could get away with it and let Chris take the rap."

"Yes," Ken admitted slowly, "but we hadn't met Balfour then. Now we know what good friends the two men always were-how much Balfour trusted Turney. And Balfour's no fool. He'd have sensed it if Turney had just been waiting all that time for the chance to rob him some day.' He slumped lower in his seat, arms resting heavily on the steering wheel. "No. I don't think that answer of mine looks very good any more."

Sandy spoke after a long pause. "But suppose something had just happened to Turney-that he'd lost a lot of money somehow, or gotten into debt? In that case he might have been suddenly tempted to take the stuff, even if he had been Balfour's friend right up until then."

"Mmm. I suppose that's possible. How do you suppose we could check on that?" Ken wondered.

"We couldn't," Sandy told him. "That's a job for experts."

Suddenly he jerked open the glove compartment and hauled out a flashlight and the Pennsylvania road map they had used earlier that day.

"What's struck you?" Ken demanded.

Sandy didn't answer. His finger was tracing a line on the map by the light of the flash. "We left Hilldale about ... so that means we've come ..."

His half-spoken thoughts shifted into coherent speech, and he was grinning. "The way I figure it," he said, "we can't be very far from the crossroad that goes up to Wanaka-and not more than ten miles away

from the place itself. There's an expert at Wanaka. You told me that's where Land was going tonight. And we need an expert. Let's go!"

"Huh!" Ken stared at him for an instant and then he too was grinning. "Great! Why, for all we know, Land might have looked into Turney's background at the time. There wasn't anything about it in that report we saw, but that doesn't prove he didn't. Even if he found Turney was in debt, he might not have mentioned it on the grounds that Turney was in the clear, according to the rest of his investigation. Let's go is right!"

"You don't think Land is so eager to convict Chris that he wouldn't even listen to this idea?" Sandy asked cautiously.

"I just think he's eager for a conviction and thinks Chris is the only candidate," Ken assured him. "After all, he's a professional investigator. He probably doesn't have any feelings about the business at all."

"O.K., then. There are some signs at that crossroads. Pull up so we can read them and find out exactly where we are."

Ken started the car and eased it forward a few hundred feet, pulling into the driveway of the closed gas station from which the signs were readily legible.

"Hey! Look at that!" Sandy's voice was exultant. "The road to the left goes to Wanaka and it's only ten miles!"

They grinned at each other, convinced that this was a good omen for the validity of their new theory.

"What time was Land arriving there?" Sandy asked suddenly. "Did Pop tell you that?"

Ken frowned, trying to recall Pop's exact words over the phone. "I don't think he said. Chris could reach him there tonight is all I remember. But wait a minute! Pop did say something about Land having been in Chris's room right up until he drove out of town at-at-" Ken beat a fist against his forehead in the effort to recall-"at four o'clock, I think he said."

"Good. Then we can figure." Sandy consulted the map again. "In that case he ought to get there at about ten or ten thirty, allowing time out to eat dinner on the way. And it's ten thirty right now. So we ought to find him there all right."

Ken was looking thoughtfully at the illuminated telephone booth on the outside wall of the filling station. "I think we ought to phone him first," he said slowly. "He may not want to talk to us at Turney's. Maybe he'd rather meet us some place else. What do you think?"

"Good idea," Sandy agreed. "I'm tempted to call home too," he added, "but now that we're this close we might as well check with Land first, and see what he knows, before we get their hopes up again."

Ken nodded, and they slid out of the car and headed for the booth.

"If the motel clerk connects me with him," Ken said, half to himself, "I'll just try to hint what we're after and ask him if he wants to meet us some place else. I'd just as soon not meet Turney himself tonight."

A moment later he was fishing in his pocket for change, dialing the operator, and asking to be connected with the motor court managed by James Turney in Wanaka.

"You must mean the Wanaka Motor Court," the operator said crisply. "There's only one there."

"I guess I do," Ken agreed.

He deposited the sum she asked for and waited.

Sandy, leaning against the open door of the booth, raised his eyebrows at him after a moment.

"Clerk must be out for coffee," Ken muttered. Then he turned toward the phone. "Hello? Wanaka Motor Court? ... May I speak to Mr. Land, please."

In the quiet of the night Sandy too could hear the precise, rather thin voice on the other end of the wire.

"We're closed for the season. There are no guests here at all. You must have made a mistake."

"Oh." Ken thought fast. If the court was closed, then he was probably speaking to Jim Turney himself. "I don't think I've made a mistake. Isn't there a Harry Land there now-not staying there, of course, but--"

"What was that name?"

"Land," Ken said distinctly. "Harry Land, of the Allied Surety Company."

"Oh! Yes, he was here a moment ago. He's just left. Perhaps I can catch him. Who is calling, please?"

"This is Holt of the *Brentwood Advance*. I'm doing a story on the Bell case," Ken said firmly, "and I wanted to discuss a few points with him. Am I speaking to Mr. Turney, by any chance?"

"What?" The thin voice squeaked. "No-I mean, yes. But don't ask *me* any questions about the Bell case. I have no comment on it-none at all. Just a moment, now, and I'll see if I can catch Mr. Land for you."

For a long interval only silence came over the wire.

Finally the operator said briskly, "Your three minutes are up. Signal when through, please."

"I will, operator," Ken told her.

Then suddenly a new voice boomed over the wire-a deep, heavy voice. "Harry Land here. Who's calling? ... Someone from Brentwood, is it? From the newspaper there?"

"I'm calling from the crossroads just ten miles south of you, Mr.

Land,” Ken explained, careful to keep his voice so low that it could be heard by no one except the man on the other end of the line. “But I work for the *Brentwood Advance* and learned where to reach you through the office. I’d like very much to talk to you about the Balfour robbery.”

“Yes?” The booming voice was cautious but encouraging.

“What I want to talk about concerns Turney,” Ken said softly.

“Yes?” The query had a sharp note of surprise in it. “Well, in that case-” Land paused.

“Yes,” Ken said. “That’s why we thought you might not want to meet us up there.”

” We?”

“Sandy Allen’s with me, Mr. Land. He’s with the *Advance* too. Could we meet you somewhere else?”

“That’s a practical suggestion,” Land said approvingly, “but I’m not sure I could work it in. If you’d care to give me some idea of-er-of what you wanted to interview me about ...”

“Is it safe for me to talk?” Ken asked.

“For you? Oh, yes,” Land said heartily.

“I understand,” Ken said. “But you’re not alone and don’t want to talk yourself.”

“That’s right,” Land agreed. He managed to put a note of geniality into his voice, as if he were answering an ordinary reportorial question.

“All right. The thing is,” Ken said, “we’ve figured out how he-the person I just mentioned-could have robbed that vault, no matter how watertight his alibi sounds. It’s like this.” He spoke rapidly. In less than a minute he had outlined the theory he and Sandy had worked out.

Land listened in complete silence.

When Ken stopped speaking, the man who had heard him out so patiently didn’t comment for a moment, and then he said, “So you want to quote me on that, eh? Well, it seems to me you’ve put it very clearly. I’d be willing to agree to that statement as coming from me.”

The voice had sounded so casual that neither Ken nor Sandy, who had been leaning close to the phone, understood the import of the words immediately.

It struck Ken like a blow. “You mean you think -you mean that’s the way you’ve figured it too?”

“That’s right,” Land agreed, with that same note of geniality that had so skillfully concealed his real meaning before. “You can quote me in exactly those words!”

## CHAPTER XII

### A TRAP IS BAITED

Ken felt almost limp with relief at the realization that the highly professional insurance investigator no longer attributed the robbery of the Balfour vault to Christopher Bell.

"That's great!" was all he could manage for a moment.

Sandy's face was one vast amazed grin.

"But I don't see how I can fit in a personal interview this evening," Land was saying.

Quickly Ken pulled himself together. Now, more than ever, it seemed important for Sandy and himself to talk to Harry Land face to face. "But couldn't we-?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Land. Sorry, Ken." Sandy had thrust himself between Ken and the mouthpiece. "This is Allen talking, Mr. Land. I've just had another idea. Probably it's already struck you too. Couldn't we check this-eh-theory by checking the post-office records of insured parcels mailed out that day?"

"Yes, yes. I should think so. Yes, indeed."

They couldn't tell whether Sandy's suggestion was one Land had previously thought of himself or not.

"But not right now," Land added.

"No. Of course not." Sandy was still grinning. "Not in the middle of the night."

"Exactly. As I was saying," Land went on, "I don't see how I can fit in an interview. I can't wait here to meet you. I've got too long a drive ahead of me tonight. If you were calling from nearby, I'd be willing to have a quick cup of coffee with you at the diner across the road, but under the circumstances I can't suggest anything." He paused briefly and then added, his words a little more carefully spaced than before, "I hope you understand."

Now Ken was grinning too. "We get it, Mr. Land. You'll meet us at the diner."

"Yes, that's right."

Somehow they could sense that Land was smiling too on the other end of the wire, probably in plain view of James Turney.

"We can make it in fifteen minutes," Ken assured him.

"Good. Well, thanks for being so understanding. But I know you realize I'm a busy man. Busier than usual these days, in fact."

"Yes. We understand."

Sandy was hauling at his arm the moment Ken hung up the receiver. "What a smart guy! Hasn't got time for an interview! Would

be willing to have a cup of coffee with us if only we were in the neighborhood! This is once I bet you won't object to stopping at a diner!"

"This is once you're right," Ken told him. He was in the car as he spoke, and then had to jump out again and run back to the booth to pay the over—charges on the call. But even so, he had the convertible swirling out of the gas station driveway and into the crossroad leading toward Wanaka seconds after the last words of their remarkable conversation with Harry Land.

"Gosh," Sandy said regretfully, "I almost wish we'd taken time out to call home! But I guess we can do it from the diner. Do you suppose he figured the whole thing the same way we did, or that we got some of the details wrong?"

"I don't care how many details we got wrong, as long as Chris is going to be cleared."

"I don't either."

The northbound highway they were following proved to be a busier road than the one they had just left. Ken was constantly having to make his way around trucks—coal-bearing trucks, most of them, from mines in the vicinity—or blink his lights down for oncoming vehicles. There were several small towns along the way too, still brightly lighted and busy at that hour of a Friday evening, and traffic through each of them was slow and halting.

Fourteen minutes of hard driving had already gone by when they saw a sign declaring that Wanaka was still one mile ahead. A few hundred feet beyond the signpost was a large handsome billboard advertising the Wanaka Motor Court. "Just half a mile north," the legend beneath the name read.

"That means the motel is on this side of the center of town," Sandy warned, "so take it easy."

Almost immediately they began to pass the first of a series of gas stations, farmers' markets, small factories, and other buildings common to the outskirts of cities.

When the dashboard meter indicated that they had traveled four-tenths of a mile since Sandy's warning, Ken slowed down and both boys began to peer ahead carefully. Now the road was running along a wide shelf that seemed to have been cut out of the side of a hill. Not far from the shoulder on the right, the hill rose upward into the darkness. On the left it fell away, and occasional lights flickered in the valley far below.

"Coming up!" Sandy said. "There's the motel on the left—and there's a big diner right opposite it!"

They looked curiously at the Wanaka Tourist Court as they swung into the diner's big parking space carved out of the rising hill on the

other side of the road.

"Balfour was right. It is a nice place," Ken said.

The court Turney managed was handsomely situated, at a spot where the shelf-like cut in the hill widened out slightly. It consisted of some twenty units, gleaming white with green shutters, and set around a semicircular drive arcing back from the highway. The rear windows of each cottage would obviously give its tenants magnificent views of the valley below. Inside the curve of the drive were beds of chrysanthemums still in full bloom, and the row of trees that backed the buildings were still in full leaf. But the sign set among the flower beds was not illuminated, and drawn Venetian blinds on the unlighted windows emphasized the fact that the court had already closed down for the winter.

The only sign of life was the light behind a pair of windows in the central unit, which apparently served as an office, and the faint glint of metal that suggested an automobile was parked in the carport beside that building.

But the boys were too eager for their meeting with Land to look longer at the motor court. They got hastily out of the convertible, locking it behind them, and had turned toward the door of the huge brightly lighted diner when they saw a big burly man striding toward them.

"Isn't that car from Brentwood?" the man asked genially.

They both recognized the voice instantly.

"Mr. Land?" Ken queried.

"That's right." He extended a powerful hand to each of them in turn when he came up. "I know you'll understand if I ask to see some sort of identification," he added, drawing them out of the broad square of light thrown onto the parking area through one long panel window of the diner.

"Of course." Ken reached into his pocket for his driver's license and his press card. Sandy did the same.

By the glow of the flashlight the man flicked on they could see him pulling out his own wallet, together with a sheaf of folded paper.

"Take it you've already seen this?" he asked parenthetically. "My original report to Allied."

"Yes, in Hilldale," Ken said.

"Good." Land's flashlight glowed on his wallet, opened to a driver's license and an Allied Surety Company card carrying the name Harry Land in small letters in the lower left corner. While the boys glanced at it, he took a quick look at their credentials.

With a nod of satisfaction he turned off his light. "Sorry to be so formal," he said, "but this is a pretty tricky situation we've landed in and I can't afford to take any chances."



"That's all right." Ken grinned at him. "We'd have asked to see your identification ourselves, if you hadn't offered it."

Land looked at him, startled for a moment, and then grinned too. "Good for you," he said. "You know, I didn't expect you to be so young," he went on, sobering. "Not sure I did the right thing getting you up here. But the way you picked me up so fast, on the phone, made me think I could count on you for a little help."

"Sure you can," Sandy said quickly. "We may not be exactly ancient, but we've been in tricky situations before."

"Have you now? Yes-Holt and Allen," Land said, as if to himself. "I had a feeling I'd heard those names before. I remember now. You had a hand in rounding up some criminals once or twice, didn't you?"

"Once or twice," Sandy admitted.

"Well, that makes me feel a little better. The situation is—" Land put one foot up on the bumper of a coupe beside which they were standing, and leaned an arm on his raised knee. "Let me say, first," he started over, "that you two have come to exactly the same conclusion I'd reached myself—as I guess you gathered."

"That's good news," Ken told him. "But if that's the way you see it," he couldn't help adding, "why were you hammering away so hard at Chris Bell this afternoon?"

"I didn't know then what I know now," Land explained. "In fact, I don't actually *know* it right this minute. I only suspect—and that's quite a different kettle of fish. Turney's over there in the office of the motel," he went on, "and I'm pretty certain he's got at least some of that Balfour jewelry stashed away there, or in a good safe place somewhere else."

All three of them automatically craned their necks around the car that stood between them and the road, and glanced across at the two lighted windows in the motel office. Partially closed Venetian blinds concealed anything that might be going on inside the office, but even as they watched, they saw a shadow move across first one blind and then the other.

"The difficulty is," Land said, "to prove it. You see, I got this parcel-post idea on the way up here this afternoon, and when I arrived here I made a little experiment. I told Turney I was doubtful of Bell's guilt after all, and wondered if the theft couldn't have been done by mailing the stuff out of the store. In other words, I roughly outlined the method we figure was actually used, and asked him if he thought it would have been possible."

"You mean you let him know you suspected him?" Sandy blurted out.

"Exactly," Land said calmly. "I didn't accuse him, you understand. Just let him know I was going to look into the possibilities of this idea."

The way I was figuring was this: if Turney's guilty he knows, as well as we do, that the thing can be checked through the post-office records, once anybody gets the idea to make such a check. So, in my opinion, he's about to leave here, fast. If he does, we'll know he's guilty. Furthermore, he'll probably either take the stuff with him, if he's got it here, or head straight for it. In either case we can pick him up-probably with stolen goods in his possession-and that will be that."

"Pretty slick," Sandy said.

Ken nodded. "Sounds as if it ought to work. You want us to help you trail him, is that it?"

"More or less," Land admitted. "I've sent for help from my own office," he hurried on, "but the closest staff man is in Pittsburgh and can't get here for another hour yet. Turney probably won't be packed and ready to go by then. But if he should take off earlier, I might be in trouble if I tried to deal with him alone. You see, this highway isn't the only route he might take.

"Mind you," Land went on, "I think he will take this one, especially if he doesn't have the stuff with him. He'd look less suspicious just driving normally out of the court onto the road here. But I've discovered there's another road running along the side of the hill about fifty feet below Turney's buildings. Probably it's an old road, abandoned when this stretch of highway was built. I haven't had a chance to do much snooping around it so far, but I do know it intersects this one several hundred yards south of here. You passed the spot, but probably didn't notice it because it's so overgrown. That old road may also rejoin the highway north of here some place, for all I know. In any case, there seems to be a rough path leading down from his office to the road, and I've got to accept the fact that he may use that route. He may even have an extra car parked on that old road, for just such an emergency."

Land took his foot off the car bumper and straightened up. "Well, that's it. I hate to ask you, but will you keep an eye on the back of the motor court for me until my man gets here? Just in case Turney does try to take that back way out?"

"Sure," Sandy said quickly.

"What do you want us to do if we see Turney starting off that way?" Ken asked.

"I've got that worked out too," Land admitted. "You see, I was really counting on your help. I'll come along with you right now and show you where you can stand, between two of the cottages, to keep an eye on the area just back of his office-the spot he'll have to cross if he heads down the hill path. This is my car, incidentally," he said, touching the bumper on which his foot had rested. "I've got it right in line with the edge of the diner, so you won't have any trouble spotting

it from across the road if you want to signal me. Think you'll know which one it is from over there?"

Both the boys nodded.

"Good. Come on, then." Land led them north along the highway to the edge of the parking lot, so that they were out of range of Turney's windows. A spurt of traffic came by just then, and they had to wait for several trucks to rumble past before they could sprint across to the opposite side.

They were north of the Wanaka Tourist Court now too, and stepped straight from the road into a shallow stretch of woods. Land made his way through it with surprisingly little noise for a man of his bulk. At his heels Ken and Sandy found themselves curving southward around the rear of the crescent of cottages, moving gradually closer to them as they walked.

Through the trees, when they had thinned to a single row, the pale scar gouged out of the hillside fifty feet below-the old road Land had described to them-showed plainly.

A dim square of light thrown into the tree branches revealed that the office unit of the court was only three cottages ahead of them, on their left. By straining his eyes in the darkness Ken thought he could see the faint line of a path threading through the rough grass between the rear of the office building and the edge of the steep slope slanting down to the abandoned highway.

"O.K.," Land said softly. "Slip in here, between these two cottages. If Turney's taking off along the main road, you'll hear his car start up and you'll know the crisis is over. I'll take off after him, and with any luck, the whole case will be sewed up tonight.

"On the other hand"-Land's voice was barely a whisper-"if Turney takes that path leading away from his back door, I'll be depending on you to signal me. Wait until he's started down the hill, and then move out far enough so that you can see what he does when he reaches the road."

While he spoke he handed his flashlight to Ken. "Take this. When Turney starts along the road, one of you run forward to the front of the cottages here and flash me the signal. Two quick flashes if Turney heads south, three if he heads north. I'll blink my lights to let you know I've seen you, and then I'll get moving after him."

"We'd like to get moving in that case too," Sandy told him. "In either case, for that matter. This is the kind of story Granger at Global News would give his right arm for."

Land frowned for a moment. "Well," he said, "I don't know why you shouldn't get your story. You'll certainly deserve it. O.K. If Turney takes off on the main road, with me after him, run back here to your car and follow us. If he turns south on the old road, so that he'll come

out on the highway at that intersection I mentioned, I'll be able to take after him from there and you two can follow me if you want to. If he goes north along the road-and we don't know whether it rejoins the highway in that direction or not-I'll have to drive into it, over that intersection, and try to follow him that way. If that happens, and you want to get down to the old road by foot, on the same path he'll use, I'll look for you at the foot of it and pick you up. How's that?"

"Great!" Sandy said.

"Then we're all set." Even in the darkness between the two cottages they could see the flash of Land's quick smile.

A moment later he had disappeared from sight, a shadow moving against faintly lighter shadow, as he returned the way they had come.

The minutes crawled slowly by.

Once Ken caught his breath with irritation, and when Sandy bent questioningly toward him, he breathed, "We didn't call home!"

"No. That's right. It all happened so fast. Oh, well," Sandy whispered cheerfully, "when we do call maybe we'll be able to tell them it's all over!"

The night was quiet only for a few moments at a time. Usually there was the sound of leaves rustling in the crisp wind, or the roar of a truck zooming past on the highway. Occasionally the door of the diner across the road opened and shut again, loosing on the air the faint rattle of dishes or a few unintelligible shouted words of greeting or farewell.

Ken was glad they wouldn't have to depend on some slight sound to warn them of Turney's movements. If Turney left his office he would undoubtedly turn out the light first, and they would know when that happened because the square of brightness on the tree branches opposite the rear office window would disappear.

Fifteen slow minutes had gone by when that happened. The illuminated tree branches suddenly disappeared, became only another square of darkness indistinguishable from the surrounding dark.

Sandy's strong hand clamped around Ken's arm.

Tensely they waited. A car whooshed past along the main road. The wind rose in a small flurry and the leaves rustled more loudly than before. And then, through the other faint noises, they caught the unmistakable sound of a door being gently closed near at hand.

Every muscle taut, they shifted their unblinking eyes to the stretch of ground between the office door and the edge of the descent behind it, straining for the first sign of movement across that area.

Sandy's fingers tightened. Was a figure crossing that stretch?

A moment later a brief but startlingly significant scene was played out before their eyes.

A flashlight, muffled by a layer of cloth, suddenly illuminated a

small circle of space near the spot where the path started downward. Against its glow they could see the silhouette of a man, standing between two large valises. The slight, thin figure leaned forward, sending his light down the path, as if to assure himself that it was quite safe. Then, still holding the lighted flash in his right hand, he managed to pick up one bag in the same hand, and the second bag in his left. The two pieces of luggage were obviously heavy. His body sagged slightly with the weight of them. Slowly, a step at a time, the man started downward, gradually disappearing

Slowly, the man started downward from sight as he followed the steeply declining path.

When he was no longer visible, the boys began to move, very slowly and cautiously, toward the line of trees edging the crest.

Now, in a quiet moment when no traffic rushed past on the road, they could clearly hear the sound of footsteps that seemed to be slithering and scraping down a sharp slope.

The boys had just reached a spot from which they could look downward and see the pale streak of the old road below them, when the figure emerged onto it. He was some distance north of them. The muffled flashlight was off now. The man carrying the two bags no longer needed it. Without hesitation, he started along the road in a northerly direction, opposite to that which would have led him to that overgrown intersection. The paleness of the graveled road itself was guide enough for him, and against it his moving figure showed plainly to the watchers above. A faint rattle of shoes against loose stones floated clearly to their ears, as the man who was undoubtedly James Turney walked steadily away toward some unknown destination.

“Three flashes,” Ken reminded Sandy as he pressed the flashlight into his hand. “I’ll wait for you here.”

## CHAPTER XIII

### A TRAP IS SPRUNG

Sandy rejoined Ken in less than two minutes, slightly out of breath. "Land saw me all right," he whispered. "Blinked his lights back." "Good."

Sandy was already peering down at the road, trying to relocate the trudging figure with the two bags.

"Right there," Ken showed him.

The man had been walking slowly, presumably because his burdens were heavy. He had gone scarcely three hundred feet beyond the point where the downhill path led into the old road.

"Let's go," Sandy urged.

"O.K. But we'll have to feel our way. Can't use the flash."

The path was easy enough to follow, walled in on both sides as it was by dense vine-matted bushes. But the descent was sharp and twisting, and the footing of hard-packed earth by no means smooth.

Ken went first, keeping his hands on the hedge-like bushes between which he walked, and sliding his feet forward rather than lifting them, in the effort to avoid stepping down unexpectedly on a loose stone, or stumbling over a root. Sandy kept a safe few feet behind him.

Ken had a strong impulse to hurry, for fear Land would reach the foot of the path in his car before they arrived there themselves, and then continue on after Turney alone. But he fought down the urge, knowing that haste might cause a noisy crash which would give away their presence. He reminded himself that Land would realize they couldn't rush headlong down the steep path, and that the insurance investigator would wait at least briefly for them if he reached the rendezvous first.

Suddenly an uneasy feeling came over Ken. Would Land drive into the old road with his headlights on? If he did, the results would be fatal. Turney would catch the glow of the lights, even at a distance, and be naturally suspicious of any car using the abandoned road at that particular moment.

Then Ken remembered how clever Land had been during their telephone conversation, and assured himself that the man would certainly know better than to use his lights.

But almost as soon as that doubt was conquered, another one arose. Wouldn't the sound of Land's car alone be enough to alarm Turney? And this troubling thought couldn't be dispelled as easily as the first. Instead, with each step down the slope, Ken became more

and more convinced that the plan Land had outlined to them, for keeping on Turney's trail, was simply not good enough.

If Turney had left by the main highway, or if he had taken the old road south and joined the main one at the overgrown intersection, Land would undoubtedly have been able to follow him successfully by the methods he had worked out. But the one route for which Land's plan had been least effective was the route Turney was taking. And with each passing second Ken felt more certain that Turney would elude them.

Unconsciously, Ken stepped forward with more boldness, propelled by the urgency of catching Turney, even without Land's help, if necessary. Now that he and Sandy were this close to the man whose guilt Chris Bell had been bearing for four long years, they would never forgive themselves if they let him slip through their fingers.

Ken's foot came down on a stone. It skidded under him, throwing him off balance. His fingers clutched at branches but he felt himself toppling backward. Then Sandy's powerful hand grabbed his shoulder.

"Steady," Sandy breathed. "You O.K.?"

Ken found his feet. "Sure. Thanks." But he had learned a lesson. He knew now that any attempt to hurry must be avoided. In another instant, if Sandy hadn't caught him in time, he would have fallen with a thud that Turney would almost certainly have heard.

For the rest of the way down the slanting, zigzag path, Ken moved with greater caution than before, though with each agonizingly careful step his conviction grew that Land's plan was not going to work.

There had been no gleam of the man's headlights yet, and Ken was glad of that. But also there had been no faintest sound of Land's car motor, and Ken had been straining his ears for that.

He tried to believe that Land was delaying deliberately, in order to give Turney the chance to get far enough away so that he would hear no noise of pursuit. But Land would have to close in on Turney eventually. And if Turney wasn't in a car of his own by then, and therefore unable to hear another motor over the sound of his own, what did Land plan to do?

Ken rounded a corner. The end of the path came in sight. Now he could see where it dipped into a tiny gully at the shoulder of the old road. In another moment he and Sandy would be on the road themselves, ready for Land's arrival, ready for the next step toward establishing Turney as the thief who had so long eluded detection.

Ken stepped down into the gully and Sandy joined him there. Careful not to move away from the cover of the undergrowth at their backs, so that if Turney looked back he would not see them silhouetted against the road, they stood in silence waiting for some

sign of Land's approach.

Except for the noticeable lightness of the graveled road itself, with Turney's figure barely visible now several hundred feet along to their right, the darkness around them was complete. They sensed rather than saw that on the opposite side of the road the hillside fell away into the valley. They knew only because they had just descended it that the hill rose on up behind them to the wide shelf along which the highway ran.

Sandy shifted his weight uneasily. "I wish Land would hurry up," he said under his breath.

Suddenly, somewhere across the road, and sounding as if it were just a few feet below the road's level, a dead twig snapped. It made a report like a pistol shot, even against the faint background of a truck motor growling somewhere in the distance just then.

Ken's first thought was one of relief that Land had recognized the danger of using his car and was coming on foot instead, making his way through the underbrush just below the far side of the road.

"Land-on foot," Ken whispered.

But he had barely spoken the words when another sound struck their ears.

This time it was the rattle and bounce of a stone clattering downhill. And this time the sound was at their backs, somewhere on the slope above them.

As if with a single motion their heads twisted around. The same thought had struck them both. If one of the noises they had just heard had been caused by Land, then a second figure moving through the darkness must have made the other.

Ken half turned again to glance swiftly down the road. Turney was no longer visible. But only a moment ago they had still been able to see him there, and Ken knew it couldn't possibly be Turney who was now across the road or on the hill above.

At that instant a brilliant beam of light stabbed straight at them, from a spot just over the far side of the road. It held them in its dazzling glare as relentlessly as if they had been snared in a huge net. Ken felt branches against his shoulders and knew only then that he had automatically backed away from the pitiless beam.

"All right, you two! Stay right where you are!" The rough voice that shouted the words was one they had never heard before.

Instinct told Ken that the beam was aimed at Sandy and himself by an enemy. And all his uneasiness of the past suspenseful minutes exploded into the realization that in their determination to trap Turney they had themselves walked into a trap.

It was too late now to regret their mistake, to wish they had tried to persuade Land to adapt other tactics. Perhaps it was even too late



to extricate themselves.

They couldn't get away by running down the road. That relentless beam would pursue them along the flat open ribbon of gravel, and escape would be impossible. And they had no means of defending themselves.

But even as that last despairing thought flashed into Ken's mind he knew it wasn't true. One light could always be used to counter another, and so far a light was the only weapon their mysterious opponent had used.

Ken's hand was clutching Sandy's coat sleeve. It slid down, found the cylinder in Sandy's hand, and seized it. Ken was pointing the flashlight across the road when he flicked the switch, directing it head-on at the source of that glare. It didn't illuminate the man who held the other light, but Ken felt sure it must be blinding him as effectively as his beam blinded Sandy and himself.

He was sure of it when the rough voice, angry now, called instantly, "Put that out! Fast!"

"Come on!" Ken told Sandy in a swift whisper. "Back up into the path! Behind the bushes!"

"Kill that light!" the voice across the road shouted again. "I've got a gun," it added ominously, as Ken kept the flash pointed across the road while Sandy pulled him toward shelter. "Put that out or I'll shoot it out!"

For what seemed an endless moment Sandy was drawing him jerkily backward and Ken was trying to keep his light steady. How long, he wondered, would their assailant wait before making good his threat?

Then he felt Sandy drop low. "O.K. Bushes on your left."

Ken doused the flash as he turned and dove to his knees. "Now up the hill!"

But they had scrambled only a few feet up the incline when another light blazed into life above them, and a second strange voice shouted, "Where are they? Can you see them?"

"Starting up the path!" the first voice answered. "Cut them off!"

Ken's mind was whirling. Who were these strangers who made no attempt to conceal their deadly purpose? And where was Land? What had happened to him? But while the questions tumbled incoherently in his thoughts he was still moving upward in Sandy's wake.

The second light was swinging closer now, ranging left and right as it sought them out. Once it illuminated a patch of green branches right above their heads, passed on, and started back again. Ken knew he and Sandy hadn't yet been seen, in the twisting, narrow channel of the bush-lined path. But he also knew that somewhere, not far above them, their way was blocked. They would never be allowed to reach

the safety of the hilltop by the route they were following.

“Cut through the bush!” he whispered.

“Right!” Sandy agreed.

They turned sideways and tried to plunge headlong into the thick vine-clogged undergrowth.

The vines were strong, and grew so thick that it was scarcely possible to thrust a hand among them. Frantically they tore at the tough leafy stems laced together into an almost impenetrable mesh. They were still crouched sideways, still unable to breach the living wall rising beside the path, when the two lights converged on them. They could feel the brilliance of the meeting beams. They could sense, without even turning their heads, that the men who held the lights were now closing in, one from the road, the other from above.

“Get up, you two!” the first voice commanded. “We’ve got you covered! In another second we’ll fire if you don’t stand up and start moving back toward the road.”

Ken’s hands stopped tearing at the vines. “We’re done for,” he said quietly.

Sandy’s powerful fingers ripped aside one more twisted stem. Then footsteps thudded so close to them that the ground under their knees shook, and Sandy too gave up.

Slowly, side by side, the boys rose to their feet into the glare of two powerful flashlights.

“Now come on back down to the road!” The rough voice sounded triumphant.

“I’m right behind them, Chet!” the second voice called out. “They can’t try anything else!”

Chet! Ken could see the name in big, black type the moment he heard it. He didn’t need the corroboration of the impatient answer from the man in front of them.

“Of course they can’t, Pete! Just keep them coming.”

Now, at least, the answer to one question was clear. Their captors were Chet Rogers and Pete Wright, recently released from the state penitentiary for admitted complicity in the Balfour robbery.

As Ken and Sandy stepped off the path into the little gully at the edge of the road, and then up onto the graveled surface, it was Chet Rogers who called out, “All right, Turney! We’ve got them!”

Rogers had backed away as the boys neared the road, but now he came closer again, and in the light of his confederate’s flash the boys had their first look at him. His body was square and compact. His square face, under an unruly mop of black curly hair, was more alive than it had looked in the newspaper photographs accompanying the story of the robbery. And in those photographs Rogers had not been grinning as he was grinning now.

“You hear me, Turney?” The voice had a grin in it too. “I said we’ve got them! It’s safe for you to come back now.”

Turney’s thin-voiced response, from somewhere down the road beyond the circle of the flashlights’ glare, sounded out of breath and angry. “Don’t talk to me like that! I’m coming!”

Pete Wright, as he stepped out from behind the boys to join Rogers, was grinning as broadly as his accomplice. He was bigger than Rogers, and the hair flattened down on his head was light instead of dark. But like Rogers he was dressed in slacks and leather jacket, and he too had a gun in one hand and his flashlight in the other.

“We don’t need the old man, Chet,” Wright said. “We can handle these two. Look at them—they’re only kids!” He thrust his gun forward at the boys. “Aren’t you? Come on, speak up!” The gun flicked against Sandy’s arm.

It had looked like a light blow. Ken could scarcely believe it when he saw Sandy go down under it. Falling sideways, he sprawled on the ground at the edge of the old road.

“On your feet!” Wright growled.

“All right,” Sandy muttered, spreading his hands flat on the gravel to give himself leverage.

An instant later a big handful of the small, sharp stones flew upward toward Rogers and Wright, spraying their faces like buckshot. Both men reared back, yelling with rage and pain.

By then Ken was ready. He reacted almost as swiftly as if he had known all along what Sandy was plotting. The flashlight in his hand swung upward in a swift arc that sent Chet Rogers’ gun spinning off into the darkness. In the same instant Ken banged downward on the man’s flashlight with his other hand. Then he turned on Pete Wright, who had raised one arm toward a pain-contorted face, and with the same swift tactics Ken hurled aside Wright’s gun and his light. Darkness closed down abruptly.

Sandy, scrambling to his feet, grabbed Ken’s wrist. “Let’s go!”

And then they were flying down the road in the dark, in the direction of the intersection, running faster than they had ever run before.

Somewhere at their backs a thin voice called, “What’s happened? Where are you?” And a thin beam of light flickered over the countryside, as Turney tried to probe the night from a distance with his own flash.

But the ray couldn’t reach Ken and Sandy. Side by side, they were tearing ahead at breakneck speed. Behind them now, like the echo of their own steps, was the sound of pounding feet.

Where was Land? Ken was asking himself. Had the insurance investigator fallen a victim to the same trio before he and Sandy had

been trapped?

Suddenly a pair of headlights blazed alive just ahead.

“Land!” Sandy gasped.

Desperately they tried to lengthen their stride.

Ken swallowed, to bring up a voice in which he could shout a warning. He could see a shadow emerge from the vehicle, and then materialize into Land’s burly figure as it stepped forward into the headlights’ glare.

“Watch out!” Ken managed to call. “Rogers and Wright-and Turney! They’re armed!”

“Take it easy! So am I.” Land’s voice boomed at them calmly, and his hand moved so that they could see the glint of his gun.

“It was a trap!” Ken told him with almost his last breath, as he and Sandy reached the stretch of road illuminated by the headlights.

“They’re right behind us!”

“And I’m right in front of you. So relax, boys.” Silhouetted against the light, Land’s face was in shadow, but he sounded amused.

Ken and Sandy were within arm’s length of him before they realized that the gun in Land’s hand was pointed at them. Unable to believe their eyes, they faltered to a stop.

“That’s it,” Land said easily. “Hold it right there, where I can keep you both covered!” Then he raised his voice. “It’s all right, Turney! I’ve got them!”

“Yes, sir,” he added quietly. “Got you two right where we want you!”

## CHAPTER XIV

### INTO THE MOUNTAIN

Five minutes had passed since Ken and Sandy had hurled themselves toward the headlights of Land's car, to be met with the astounding sight of Land's gun aimed at them and Land's voice saying, "Yes, sir, we've got you right where we want you!"

Rogers and Wright had reached the car some two minutes later, and Turney had just now come panting up, no longer carrying the two big bags. He was a slight gray-haired man, with a face and a body both as thin as his voice.

The boys had scarcely looked at each other during the interval. In a kind of numb resignation they had listened to Rogers and Wright relate angrily an account of the boys' attempt to elude them.

"Well, cheer up," Land had reassured the two men. "I was on the job, as usual. Everything's O.K. now. Forget it. It's time to get down to business."

Ken did clench his fists then, as a wave of baffled anger rushed over him. What fools he and Sandy had been, to trust this man! It was no comfort to realize that the Allied Surety Company apparently trusted him too, and had no suspicion of his readiness to double-cross them for his own benefit.

"All right, Turney," Land had said briskly, when the thin elderly man finally joined the group standing in the glare of Land's headlights. "Let's get this over with."

But Turney seemed in no particular hurry. While he caught his breath after his dash up the road he rubbed his slender hands with satisfaction. "Things are going splendidly, aren't they?" he asked the other men. "Yes, splendidly. And now perhaps you'll admit the advantages of intelligent planning. Your original idea of seizing these two busybodies as soon as they drew up at the diner-well!" He laughed. "Half a dozen customers at the diner would probably have rushed out to interfere-or a couple of passing truck drivers would have taken over the situation. But by following my plan, these two walked right into this snug trap all by themselves."

"Let's cut out the commercial on intelligence and get moving!" Pete Wright growled. "After all, you said yourself these two kids were pretty smart to have figured out about mailing the loot, and all-and look where it got them! So why do we have to listen to speeches about how great it is to be smart?"

"Ah, but intelligence is wasted on youth," Turney told him, still smiling. "Take Chris Bell, now. He was intelligent too. But his youth

led him astray. Just because he was clever enough to learn most of what I knew, he thought he could also take over my position and-" He broke off abruptly. "But you're right. This is no time for talk. Let us complete our work."

So that's what Turney's motive was, Ken found himself thinking suddenly. Turney had stolen the Balfour jewelry out of revenge against Balfour and Bell, because after a lifetime of service he had felt himself left out in the cold when Balfour began to talk of making Chris his manager.

The theft had always seemed out of character for the Turney that Balfour and Chris talked about. In fact, the man Turney had probably been for most of his life could almost certainly not have brought himself to commit it. But his misunderstanding of Balfour's real feelings toward himself, and Bell's too, must have snapped something in his mind-and after that Turney had been glad of a chance to make both men pay for what he believed they wanted to do to him.

Once the explanation occurred to Ken, it seemed so logical that he couldn't understand why he hadn't thought of it before. If only he had, he thought grimly. Then he and Sandy wouldn't have come to Wanaka, in the hope of learning some basis for Turney's motive from Land. They had discovered the long-kept secret that would free Chris Bell, but it would do him no good until it was in the hands of the police. Right now, there seemed very small chance of getting it there.

Vaguely Ken became aware that Turney was speaking to him.

"Come, come!" the thin voice demanded. "I told you to give me your car keys!"

Ken could feel Sandy reach toward him with a protesting gesture. But Ken knew that if he didn't hand over the keys, they would be taken from him. And he suspected that the possibility of losing their car was now the least of their worries. Slowly he reached into his pocket for the two small metal keys dangling from a key ring Bert had given him.

"That's better!" Turney beamed. "Now you're showing a more intelligent attitude of cooperation."

He turned and handed the keys to Pete Wright. "Go up to the diner parking lot and get their car," he directed. "Bring it down to this road. The rest of us will start on in the meantime."

Wright looked for a moment as if he were going to argue with Turney's calm order, but Chet Rogers waved him on.

"Go ahead and get the car, Pete," he said. "After all, we can't get along with the division of the stuff until everything's cleared up here." Pete Wright shrugged and took off, edging his way around Land's car and disappearing into the darkness toward the intersection with the main road.

“Now let’s get started,” Turney said. “You two”- he nodded toward Ken and Sandy-“turn around and start walking down the road. Mr. Rogers will be right behind you with his gun. So will I. I’m armed too, you see.” With a queer cackling laugh he drew a small revolver from his pocket. “And to light our way well have the car, coming slowly along behind us. You’ll drive Land’s car, won’t you?”

Turney’s last words were addressed to the man whose license read Harry Land, and it was a moment before Ken caught their significance.

“Land’s car?” he repeated suddenly, almost unaware that he spoke. His eyes went from the small, neat coupe to the burly man with the booming voice. “Then you’re not Land?”

Beside him, Sandy choked back a gasp of surprise.

“Quite a shock to you, isn’t it-to have been wrong all this time?” The booming voice held the note of genial amusement the boys had heard before. “And you with such a reputation as detectives -and so proud of the way you managed our conversation over the phone when-“

“Who are you?” Sandy broke in.

The big man started to move around to the car door. “Mustn’t ask impertinent questions,” he said with a grin. “Let’s just say I’m a friend. You can call me Joe.” He glanced back over his shoulder at Turney. “Come to think of it, though,” he added to the older man, “I guess *you* wouldn’t call me a friend, would you?”

Turney laughed again in that high-pitched tone. “Why not, Joe? After all, you did prove invaluable when it came to impersonating Land for our young visitors here. And you handled it masterfully-just as masterfully as I handled the disposal of poor Mr. Land. Don’t you think so, Mr. Rogers?”

“Never mind what I think,” Rogers growled at the thin, elderly man so different from his other associates. “All I want is to get this pair out of the way, divide up the stuff, and take off.”

“You know,” Turney told him musingly, “I’m not sure you ever think at all.”

“You’re not, huh?” Rogers snapped. “I suppose Pete and I weren’t thinking pretty well when we tossed Bell to the cops and saved your hide!”

“Oh, that! A lucky guess, that’s all,” Turney said. “Why, you didn’t even know then whose hide, as you call it, you were protecting.”

“Not then, maybe. But the minute we heard the vault had been robbed, we figured you as the one most likely to succeed. And now we figure on you dividing up nice and even with three-quarters of the stuff coming to the three of us.”

“No!” Turney interrupted sharply. “We agreed on two thirds for you and-“

“Oh, no, you don’t, Turney.” The burly man the boys had once thought of as an insurance investigator spoke from the door of the car. “Four ways even-and don’t you forget it! Or the whole thing’s off right now and we-“

“AH right, all right!” Turney’s agreement was quick. “We won’t argue, Joe.”

“Good!” Joe boomed. “Then let’s put this consignment with the other goods, shall we?”

“Yes, indeed,” Turney nodded. “My, my, we’re acquiring quite a collection of brilliant detective brains, aren’t we? Go ahead, you two,” he added to the boys. “Start walking.”

Rogers motioned Sandy to move down the road ahead of himself. “And no trick falls to pick up a handful of gravel on the way!” he warned. “That won’t work twice!”

Sandy’s big fists bunched at his sides. He hadn’t moved.

Ken put a quick hand on his friend’s arm. “Come on,” he said under his breath. He realized the big redhead was on the verge of striking out at their captors, and Ken knew that such an attempt now could end only in disastrous failure.

“Where are you taking us?” he asked, raising his voice. “To the same place where you ‘disposed’ of Land?”

Nobody answered his questions. He didn’t expect answers. He had spoken only to let Sandy know, in case he had missed the hint in Turney’s last speech, that soon they might find themselves imprisoned somewhere with the real Harry Land. Then, at least, there would be three of them together-if Land was still alive.

Sandy flashed him a quick glance that said he understood, and then started down the road ahead of Rogers. Ken walked at Sandy’s side, with Turney close behind him. Their shadows stretched far ahead of them as they moved, cast forward onto the pale graveled surface by the headlights of the coupe traveling slowly at their rear.

The sound of a truck roaring past on the highway above seemed to mock them. It was no more than a thousand feet away, but it might as well have been miles distant so far as they were concerned.

The stretch of road over which they were walking was the same one the boys had covered in their desperate and futile dash for safety. Now it seemed much longer than when they had been tearing along it at breakneck speed.

What would happen, Ken wondered, when they reached the path that rose away from the road toward the office of the motor court?

But even as the question came to his mind he realized they were already passing the spot. He barely caught a glimpse of the opening in the bushes through which the path began its ascent, and then they were beyond it, walking steadily farther north, as Turney had done



when they stood watching him and waiting for the man they had known as Harry Land.

So much had happened since then that Ken found it impossible to think logically. He was frightened. He admitted that to himself. But he and Sandy had been in tough spots before and had somehow managed to fight their way out. Why couldn't he believe that would happen now?

He told himself that Rogers and Wright were not particularly clever, even if the third man, Joe, was of more dangerous caliber. And as for James Turney -Ken forced himself to try to figure out exactly what he did think of Balfour's former employee.

The man wasn't strong physically. He had backed down like a scared rabbit when the others, who were clearly blackmailing him with their knowledge of his guilt, demanded a full three-quarters of the amount Turney had stolen. Obviously Turney realized that after four long years of safety his nearly perfect crime had come apart at the seams. He even seemed to accept, without argument, the necessity of giving up now the greater portion of what he had once brazenly taken from the Balfour vault. Yet at the same time Turney seemed mysteriously pleased with himself.

It didn't make sense, unless, Ken told himself slowly, Turney himself was planning to double-cross the men upon whom he now seemed to rely as partners. And if Turney was really clever enough to deceive three practiced criminals-one of them as skillful as the impersonator of Land-it probably would be impossible for Ken and Sandy, who also shared the knowledge of his guilt, ever to escape him.

As they walked silently along the abandoned road, with the small gray-haired man close behind them, able to watch every move they made in the glare of the car's headlights, Ken felt a chilling sense of fear worse than any he had ever known in his life.

"Stop here!" Turney ordered suddenly.

They had come about as far along the road as Turney had come when they were watching him earlier, Ken thought. His guess was confirmed a moment later when Turney, warning Rogers to guard the boys closely, disappeared briefly into the roadside bushes and reappeared carrying the two heavy bags.

"We'll need these," Turney announced. "You carry them." His thin hand gestured commandingly at the boys with his little revolver.

Ken and Sandy both hesitated, but there was nothing to do but obey.

The bags were heavy. Turney had not been acting when he seemed to have difficulty carrying them both himself. At that time Ken and Sandy had assumed-just as Turney had taken for granted they would-that the bags contained the Balfour jewelry. Ken knew better now.

Turney would not expose his wealth that casually to men who were so eager to get their hands on it.

But if the bags didn't contain the jewelry, what did they hold? Ken tried to heft the one he carried, to get a hint as to its contents, but nothing inside rattled or jingled to give him a clue.

Then he gritted his teeth with anger at the realization that he was wasting time over matters of slight importance, when Sandy's life and his own were undoubtedly in danger.

Would it be possible, he wondered, trying to think as calmly as he sometimes had in previous emergencies, to swing the heavy bags at their guards, and then to run off into the brush in the moment of safety this might win them?

But he shook his head at the thought. Sandy and he had tried making their way through that undergrowth before, and Ken told himself it would be suicide to try it again.

"Watch sharply now. Turn right here," Turney said abruptly.

The turn took them into a narrow, rutted lane which led slantwise off the road at that point. A few feet along it Turney kept them waiting while the car swung in behind them, so that the overgrown path ahead was visible. Branches scratched noisily against the coupe's body as it followed on their heels between the dense green walls.

The narrow lane sloped upward from the old road. If it went far enough, and at the same angle, Ken realized, it would bring them close to the highway and its busy traffic.

But it ended after only a few hundred yards-ended at a flat rubble-strewn plateau breaking off sheer in front of them and to their left, and walled by the steeply rising hill on the right.

There was a square black shape on that hillside wall. The car lights had to strike it directly before Ken saw that it was actually an opening, perhaps fifteen feet wide and not quite so high.

Then suddenly he understood. That opening was the entrance to a coal mine, and the little plateau on which they stood formed a sort of platform in front of it, built up out of refuse from the digging. The condition of the lane by which they had reached the mine proved how long ago it had last been worked.

Ken could hear Sandy's gasp. He too had realized what they were approaching, and had guessed, as Ken had, that the deserted shaft was where their captors meant to imprison them.

Behind them, the car came to a stop.

"We'll wait here," Turney began, "until the other car-" He broke off as a second pair of headlights became visible some distance down the narrow lane. A moment later the boys' convertible drove onto the small plateau.

"Excellent!" Turney said. "We can go on now. I'll lead the way, Mr.

Rogers. You will come right behind with these two young men, and the cars will follow you.”

“I still think it’s crazy,” Rogers protested, “to waste two perfectly good cars. Why don’t we leave them outside?”

“Come now, be intelligent, Mr. Rogers,” Turney retorted impatiently. “If we don’t ‘waste’ them, as you childishly call it, they might very well lead to questions about their owners-questions which could be very dangerous indeed. But if we follow my plan we will all be perfectly safe. Perfectly safe!”

*Perfectly safe!* The words seemed to hang in the chill night air like some grim deadly joke.

Until that moment Ken had tried to convince himself that Sandy and he would be held only long enough to allow these men time to get away to some reasonably distant point. But he could no longer pretend that that was the case. He knew now that Turney had no intention of ever letting them leave the abandoned mine alive.

Turney himself was already entering the opening, walking carefully behind the beam of a flash that seemed to blunt itself against the sloping floor of the shaft and the surrounding darkness. “Stay close behind me,” he commanded.

“Get moving, you two!” Rogers growled.

In the brief seconds while the two orders were being spoken, Ken’s mind groped frantically for some means of escape.

If he and Sandy simultaneously swung the heavy bags at Rogers, could they-?

Or if they spun around and ran back toward-?

But as the half-formed schemes presented themselves, Ken looked over his shoulder at Rogers.

Sandy’s head too was turned back toward the square compactly built man. And what they saw told them both that they were helpless.

Rogers was not close enough to be the target of a swift attack. He stood erect and vigilant, a careful ten feet behind them. His gun was ready in his hand, his eyes implacably on their headlight-illuminated figures.

“Get moving!” he repeated.

He didn’t tell them that he would shoot if the order wasn’t obeyed. His voice, his cautious stance, above all his weapon, conveyed that fact without the need for words.

This can’t be happening to us, Ken told himself. We’ll figure a way out of it in just a second!

But the rough archway was somehow already over their heads. The dank smell of earth and rock filled their nostrils. Their feet stumbled on the rough floor.

It was too late to say that this couldn’t be happening. It had

already happened.

They were inside the mine shaft, moving forward at the gun's command. Step by inevitable step, they were descending the slanting corridor that seemed to lead into the very heart of the towering mountain.

# CHAPTER XV

## DOUBLE-CROSS

At a funerallike pace the little procession moved into the tunnel of the mine. Turney's slight figure was in the lead. Ken and Sandy walked rigidly behind him. Rogers stalked at their backs. Land's car and the boys' convertible brought up the rear.

The subdued roar of the motors, as the cars crept along, sounded loud in the enclosed space. The roughness of the shaft floor made their headlight beams bounce and waver. Briefly they illuminated a rotting timber support leaning at a crazy angle, a patch of ceiling that glinted with oozing moisture, a stretch of wall where collapsing rock had carved a niche like an upright and empty coffin poised on a heap of rubble. And the monstrous distorted shadows of the four moving figures raced far ahead of the little procession itself, as if they were trying to flee the pursuing lights.

Turney suddenly stopped, turned around, and raised his hand. "This is far enough for the cars to come." The words were matter of fact, but they set up thin reverberating echoes that seemed to give voices to the shadows. "Leave those bags here too. Put them down right where you are."

Automatically Ken and Sandy lowered the heavy bags to the ground while the cars, responding to Turney's gesture, came to a halt just behind Rogers. The noise of the two motors died into ghostly silence.

"We'll use the flashlights from here on," Turney announced. "We won't need the car lights."

A moment later the car beams died too, and now only two thin pencils of light existed, converging on Sandy and Ken and isolating them in the cavelike mine which seemed suddenly to have expanded into an endless vast of pitch darkness.

The slam of two car doors in the enclosed space sounded as loud as the reports of a cannon.

Two more flashlights came on immediately afterward. The man called Joe had emerged from Land's car, gun in one hand and flash in the other. Just behind him, also carrying a gun and a light, Pete Wright strode forward from the boys' convertible.

"I will continue to lead the way," Turney said. "All three of you had better walk behind our two young-" in the dimness from which he spoke his smile was only faintly visible-"our two young guests. Some of the supports in the mine are not entirely safe," he went on calmly. "I will try to indicate where you must all walk with special care, in

order not to bring them down. Are we quite ready?"

"Not quite, Turney." Joe's booming voice had an overpowering quality inside the mine. "I've been doing a little thinking, driving along here, and there's a question I'd like to ask. Just how do you expect to divide up the loot when we get finished here?"

"Everything in its own time," Turney told him coolly. "I hardly think we need to go into such details now."

"I don't agree," Joe said flatly. "I want to know, right here and right now, how it's going to be managed. And I've got good reason for asking."

Once again Turney laughed his queer high-pitched laugh. The echoes of it had an inhuman quality. "What's the matter, Joe? Don't you trust me?"

"Of course not." Joe didn't smile to reduce the force of the statement. "I haven't been fooled by this act you've been putting on, of being perfectly willing to split with us. So I—"

"I don't pretend to be perfectly willing to share with you," Turney interrupted sharply. "But I am intelligent enough to face facts philosophically. I needed your assistance, I accept the necessity of paying for it, and I refuse to waste time regretting the cost. After all, I would no doubt have lost everything without your help, and perhaps even spent a certain amount of time in jail."

"Perhaps!" Pete Wright snorted. "There wouldn't have been any perhaps about it—once Land had you taped and then when these two kids turned up with the same idea."

"And furthermore," Turney continued, ignoring Wright, "when it comes to mistrust of one another, I have far more to fear from you than you have from me. You are three against my one. This is another of the facts that I face philosophically."

"That's just it," Joe said. "We *are* three to one. That's why I'm sure you don't intend to let us set eyes on the stuff at all, unless you've figured out some method of preventing us from walking off with the lot. I just want to know what that method is. I like to face facts too, Turney. So bring this one out and let me face it."

"What do you care whether he can protect himself and his share of the loot from us or not?" Rogers growled. "That's his worry."

"No wonder you wound up in the pen!" Joe snapped. "You haven't got the sense to—"

"Hey!" Rogers glared at him. "Go easy with words like that, Joe. Remember this is our deal—Pete's and mine. We offered you a fair cut for helping us, not for taking over and bossing us around."

"Bossing you around! I'm only trying to find out what Turney's got up his sleeve."

The sudden resentment in Rogers' voice, and the scorn in Joe's,

roused Ken from the despairing lethargy which had closed over him when he and Sandy found themselves actually inside the mine. Until this moment the four men had been working together so smoothly, despite the obvious differences between Turney and the rest, that Ken had considered them a united force against which their victims were utterly helpless. But now the unity seemed to be cracking, and if it broke up completely, he and Sandy might still have a chance.

Pete Wright was staring steadfastly at the boys, and Turney's amused interest in the sudden argument had not made his own eyes waver from Ken and Sandy. But Rogers was looking at Joe now, and Joe was looking back at him. And if the argument continued-

But Turney's next words showed that he had also sensed what might happen. "Joe is right, Mr. Rogers," he said pacifically. "I could hardly complain to the police if you three tried to take from me the entire amount of what you call the 'loot.' And if Joe doesn't believe that I trust you-"

"Of course I don't believe it!" Joe snapped. "You'd be as much of a fool to trust us as we'd be to trust you, and I know you're no fool, Turney. But I'm not, either. That's why I say you've worked out some foolproof way of giving us our split and keeping the rest safe for yourself. If you haven't, it must be because you don't intend to pay up at all -because you're planning to double-cross us instead. I just want to be sure that's not what you've got in mind."

"I see!" Again Turney laughed his strange laugh. "You really are quite intelligent, aren't you, Joe? Under the circumstances I think I'd better tell you my little scheme." He was still looking at Ken and Sandy while he directed his words to the big burly man standing off to one side of the boys.

"It's quite simple, really," Turney went on. "I'm almost surprised you haven't figured it out for yourself. I have merely placed various quantities of the-er-goods in several different places. When we are ready we will all go together to the majority of those places, until we have collected enough of the goods to make up your three shares. But since you won't know where the balance is hidden, you won't be able to add it to your already very generous amounts. Of course," he added with a shrug, "this system will not permit of an absolutely exact division, but I assume none of us is going to argue over a matter of a hundred dollars or so either way."

Ken's heart sank during the moment of silence that followed Turney's speech. Clearly the man's words had repaired the briefly strained relations among the four men. It seemed all too likely now that the group would remain united in its greed and its caution until the four-way split had been successfully achieved. And by that time, Sandy and himself would already have met whatever fate was in store

for them.

"That sure is smart!" Pete Wright was the first to comment on Turney's confidence. "How about it, Joe? Sound all right to you? You satisfied now that the old guy ain't scheming to double-cross us?"

"Yes, it's smart all right," Joe agreed slowly. "O.K.," he added more briskly. "That's all I wanted to know, Turney, and now I know it. But just don't forget that I can keep my eye on you too, while I'm watching these kids."

Turney laughed. "Good. Your reaction is just what I would expect from a man of your intelligence. And now that we all trust each other or have at least reached a working agreement that will serve in the place of trust-shall we go on?"

No one objected this time.

"I will lead the way as before, then," Turney announced. "Our guests can follow me, and you three men will guard them from the rear."

As the procession started on its way again the boys turned and looked at each other for a long moment in the light of the jouncing torches trained on their backs. Neither saw the faintest hope in the other's eyes. In the dusky shadows on either side of them rose solid walls of earth and rock. The thin, elderly man in front of them had already proved how quickly and efficiently-and how ruthlessly-he could react in an emergency. The three men behind them were all armed, and there could be little doubt that they would use their guns without hesitation at the first move from their captives.

Around them, now, the mine tunnel was contracting, shrinking in size as it burrowed farther into the earth. They had come only some two hundred feet from the entrance, but the roof was already close above their heads and the walls stood only ten feet apart. The shaft was becoming steeper now too, slanting its way inward at a steadily sharpening incline. It made the rough footing more treacherous than before. Ken found himself walking with great care, so that he wouldn't stumble on a rock and perhaps provoke one of the men behind him into firing a shot. And then he wondered grimly if that might not after all be the quickest and least painful way out of the trap now closing so rapidly around them.

"Watch the angle here," Turney said over his shoulder.

The tunnel bent just ahead of him, and he flashed his light quickly up and around so that the others could see what he meant. Rogers, Wright, and Joe decreased the space between themselves and the boys, to keep them under close guard around the bend.

When the tunnel straightened out again, it had narrowed still more, but after several paces it seemed to divide into three separate shafts, one branching off to the right, one to the left, and a third going



straight ahead. Beyond the black hole on the left came a faint sound of dripping water. Opposite it, almost completely closing off the second tunnel, was a pile of fallen rock from which protruded timber supports long since collapsed.

Turney followed the center one of the three tunnels.

"Watch out here!" he warned a moment later, and flashed his light in a quick circle again to show them that the way ahead, like the branch tunnel they had just passed, was also partially blocked where a section of the roof had fallen in. Only one upright still stood at that point, supporting a few overhead beams and keeping open a two-foot aisle.

Turney's light flicked up and down the timber. "Be careful not to brush against this," he said. "If it comes down, the roof will come with it."

"We know," Wright muttered impatiently. "We came through here before."

"But your friend Joe wasn't with us then, and neither were our young guests," Turney said calmly.

Cautiously he edged his slight figure past the single timber, and then turned beyond it to light the passage for the boys. "Come through one at a time," he said, "and stop beside me."

Ken went first, turning sideways as he moved. Sandy edged after him, with Joe alertly at his heels.

When all six of them had passed through the obstructed passage, Turney turned his light forward again. "And now here again great care is essential," he said.

Ken caught his breath.

Almost at their feet the floor of the tunnel fell away in a deep pit that stretched from wall to wall and extended for some fifteen feet along the shaft. A single three-inch plank, about a foot wide, crossed it from one end to the other.

"This hole is quite remarkably deep," Turney warned, and he smiled as if somehow the fact gave him special pleasure. "An eroded shaft to some lower level, I imagine. Listen." He had stooped quickly and picked up a stone, and now he tossed it into the cavernous black depths.

Long seconds later the sound of a splash told the others that the stone had finally struck water at the bottom.

"Yes, quite deep," Turney repeated. "And now we must move in single file again across this plank. I think perhaps only one of us at a time should use this rather-er-primitive-bridge. I shall go first and await our guests on the other side. Let them come separately, with you between them, Joe."

The plank swayed even under Turney's slight weight. Ken tried to

steady his breathing when it was his turn, and wondered at the same time why he didn't simply fling himself off into the water far below. But he told himself that if he jumped, Sandy would follow him, and he felt that Sandy, at least, must not give up. But the next moment he realized that even with all the evidence against it, he was still hoping that a miracle would occur which would save them both.

Sandy looked pale when he stepped from the plank onto solid ground again, and his rugged face seemed gaunt in the yellow torchlight. Both he and Ken watched, in grim fascination, while Rogers and Wright teetered their way along the plank, breathing so loudly that the harsh rasping sounds set up echoes against the walls.

"Good!" Turney said with satisfaction, when the six were once more together at the far end of the chasm. "And now we have only a little farther to go." The beam of his light flashed along a narrow shaft, and bounced back from what appeared to be a dead end some fifty feet beyond. "There is one more turn at that point," he explained in his usual pedantic way. "To the left this time."

Briskly, then, he strode forward in front of the boys, who were barely able to edge along side by side between the damp musty-smelling walls. Joe was directly behind them, and Rogers and Wright brought up the rear.

Turney was moving more rapidly now. Within a few seconds he had reached the turn and slid out of sight around it, this time without stopping to shine his flash backward to guide the others. Ken noticed that they passed one more tunnel branching off to the left, before they reached the turn, but none of the lights flashed into it and he was already past it before he became aware that it existed.

And then Ken was rounding the turn, with Sandy beside him. Instinctively they both stopped just beyond it. Some fifty feet ahead of them a kerosene lantern gleamed on the floor of the narrow passageway, and within its glow lay the prone figure of a man. Even at that distance the boys could see that his hands and feet were tied with what seemed to be a length of white clothesline.

But at the same instant they spotted the bound man, they realized that Turney was no longer to be seen. In the brief moment since he had turned that corner, he had vanished into thin air.

All Ken's senses, long dulled by despair, suddenly sprang alive. Joe, he knew, was almost on top of them. But before the big burly figure actually appeared, Ken grabbed Sandy's wrist, whispered under his breath, "Get set!" and thrust him to the far side of the tunnel. Then, as he himself stepped backward against the opposite wall, so that he and Sandy faced each other in front of the doorwaylike entrance into this arm of the shaft, he raised his voice in a shout.

"Turney! Where's Turney?" he yelled, in a shout loud enough to

carry back to the three armed men behind them. "He's gone!"

Simultaneously Joe burst into view. His flashlight flicked suspiciously over the boys, and then, as if unable to help himself, he pointed it straight forward, bridging the distance to the yellow glow farther down the passage. Turney's figure was not visible.

"The double-crossing rat!" Joe muttered, taking another incredulous pace forward.

Rogers and Wright made the turn in time to hear the low furious words, and moved forward to stand beside Joe and add their beams to his exploring flash.

At that moment the man lying prone in the light of the lantern began to struggle to push himself up.

Joe and his two companions instinctively started toward the bound figure, separating themselves from the boys by another full pace.

Ken's muscles were set for a forward dive. "Now!" he breathed at Sandy. "Now!"

## CHAPTER XVI

### BURIED ALIVE

Ken's bent knees straightened out like suddenly released steel springs. His head was tucked into his left shoulder, his right shoulder was raised into a battering ram aimed directly for the target of Wright's square figure. As Ken's feet left the ground he caught a glimpse of Sandy coming out of a crouch, his two hundred pounds arcing like a projectile at Joe's broad back.

Ken struck home with a bone-jarring thud, catching Wright just above the hip and folding him over like a hinge. Breath whooshed out of the man's body. But Wright twisted under the impact and came down on his back, hands already reaching upward toward Ken's throat. Ken crashed flat on top of him, elbows bent to fend off the gun and the flashlight that Wright was trying to use as clubs. The thud of Ken's full weight against the barrel chest drove the remaining air out of Wright's lungs in a single violent grunt.

As Ken landed on the supine Wright he heard Sandy strike home—heard the thump of colliding bodies and Joe's cry of enraged surprise. But Ken couldn't look around. He was grabbing for Wright's flashlight, wrenching it free of the powerful fingers, and then scrambling to his feet to kick at Wright's other hand and send his gun flying.

Ken spun around. Joe was backed against the wall, looking staggered but still on his feet. Sandy had apparently turned from him after a single assault to strike at the third man of the trio, because Rogers too was now sprawling on the rough ground of the shaft. Rogers' right hand was empty, his left was reaching for the flashlight rolling just free of his fingertips. Sandy's toe sent the lighted cylinder crashing against the wall.

But as the redhead swung back to Joe, the burly man turned his flash full in Sandy's face and brought his gun-laden right hand upward in a vicious snap. Ken reached the gun while it was still in mid-air and struck down at it with the side of his palm. Joe's fingers relaxed their grip just as Sandy's fist connected with the man's solar plexus.

"Got him!" Sandy exulted, as his fist jabbed again. This time it struck at Joe's chin as the man bent over, gasping for breath.

Joe's open mouth snapped shut under the force of the blow. His head rocked back. His heavy body seemed to be following it. Slowly he toppled rearward to land, spread-eagled, on top of Rogers. His flashlight bounced once when it fell and then rolled a few feet to come to rest against Ken's shoe.

Ken and Sandy stood motionless for a moment, sucking in gulps of

air. The speed with which they had overcome their three adversaries had left them breathless and almost unbelieving.

Ken was thinking, dazedly, that they must first free the bound man. Presumably he was Land-the real Harry Land, whom Joe had impersonated to lure Sandy and Ken into the trap of the old mine. Then, Ken thought, already turning toward the yellow glow of the lantern, we'll all get out of here-fast. Turney's amazing disappearance was still a mystery, but Ken assured himself grimly that he would willingly postpone its solution until Sandy and himself and Harry Land had escaped from the abandoned mine.

Automatically, Ken reached down and retrieved Joe's still-glowing flashlight. As he brought it up, the beam glanced along the side wall of the shaft and suddenly disappeared into nothingness. Ken jerked the light up and over, and saw another narrow shaft opening, at a point only a few feet beyond them.

"So that's how Turney disappeared!" he thought, and then shoved the fact aside to be considered later. He had taken two steps toward the struggling figure in the light of the lantern when he caught a faint echo of scurrying footsteps in the distance.

Suddenly Ken knew not only how Turney had disappeared, but why.

He spun on his heel. "Come on! Run!" he told Sandy, and started back along the shaft they had turned into a few moments before.

His shoulder struck the wall at the turn and Sandy crashed into him before he could round the bend. But both of them recovered their balance. By the light of the flash they raced along the shaft beyond it, toward the deep pit crossed by the plank bridge.

Suddenly, not more than a dozen feet ahead of them, Turney skittered out of the cross passage Ken had noticed earlier, and which he now knew must connect with the one branching out of the shaft they had just left. Without a pause the small gray figure ran ahead of them to the pit and sprinted across the plank to the far side. There Turney halted, spun around, and pointed his flashlight back at them with a mocking gesture. As he did so he bent down, grasped the end of the plank, and tugged.

Ken flung himself forward, ignoring the rough footing and the danger of a fall.

He was still twenty feet from the edge of the pit when the near end of the plank scraped over the side and dropped. Then Turney let his end go, and the heavy timber plunged out of sight.

Ken and Sandy skidded to a panting halt at the very rim of the gaping black pit, just as the plank splashed noisily into the water at the bottom.

"There they are!" An angry voice bellowing at the boys' backs set

up resounding echoes.

Instinctively Ken and Sandy turned their heads to see Joe and Rogers and Wright bearing down on them. Just as instinctively they separated, moving apart so that the two flashlights pointing at them could illuminate the now-bridgeless chasm.

The pounding footsteps faltered. While he was still a dozen paces away from them, Joe shouted, "What did you do with that plank? Why, you-1"

"Turney dropped it into the pit," Ken told him. "He's left us all trapped here."

"You're lying!" Rogers shouted. "He wouldn't!"

"Oh, yes, I would!" Turney's thin voice called.

All three men's attention shifted abruptly from the boys to the far side of the pit. Turney's head was just visible, peering at them from behind the pile of loose rock and earth that nearly blocked the passage a short distance beyond the chasm.

"Yes, indeed I would," Turney repeated. There was triumph in the thin voice. "My, you did think you were so intelligent, didn't you, Joe? But--"

Out of the corner of his eye Ken caught the shadow of a gesture and the next moment he saw the spurt of flame. Rogers had fired straight at the pale blob of Turney's face illuminated by the converging light beams.

The tunnel rocked with the concussion of the imprisoned blast. Dust flew in a cloud from the pile of rubble from whose protection Turney had peered a moment before.

The echoes of the shot were still rumbling when Turney's laugh sounded across the pit, from behind the barricade of rock and earth.

"It's just as I told you, Mr. Rogers," the invisible Turney called mockingly. "You never think! What good would it do you to kill me? None at all! You still wouldn't be able to cross that pit and get out of the mine. But you might have brought the whole tunnel ceiling down on yourselves. Don't you know loud explosions are dangerous in a place like this? Oh, my, yes-very dangerous indeed!"

As if in grim punctuation of his words, a small stone broke away from the ceiling above the pit at that moment, and landed with a long-delayed splash in the water far below.

A dead silence followed the sound.

The dust pall was in motion now. Drifting in the rays of the three lights beaming across the pit, the tiny motes seemed to be heading straight at Ken and Sandy and the three men.

Then footfalls sounded, sharp and rapid.

"He's leaving us here!" Wright's voice rose in panic.

"Turney!" Rogers bellowed. "Come back here! Get another plank

across that pit. If you know what's good for you, you'll--

"Oh, I know what's good for me." The thin voice floated back. "Oh, yes, indeed."

"Turney!" Rogers had stepped forward to the very edge of the pit, and crouched down as if he were about to attempt a leap across the apparently bottomless chasm. "We'll get you!"

"Shut up!" Joe snapped. "We're wasting time. Have you forgotten Turney's plan to set the cars afire and burn the mine supports through? Get moving if you don't want to be buried alive in here!"

Rogers backed away from the rim of the pit, staggering to his feet. "Get moving?" he repeated blankly, looking dazedly at Joe. "But where? He's got us trapped."

"Not yet he hasn't," Joe told him. "And he won't if we can bridge this thing in time to stop him. Come on everybody-get busy! Start looking for a timber that's big enough-but don't pull down any supports to get it! You too!" he ordered Ken and Sandy.

"Why should we help you?" Ken wanted to know. The men's obvious panic had had the curious result of making both Sandy and himself completely calm.

"Do you want to live-or don't you?" Joe demanded harshly.

"Are we going to?" Ken asked him levelly.

Joe opened his mouth to answer, shut it again, and then gestured at them impatiently. "All right. I get it. You win. If we get out of here, we'll all go together. O.K.? Now get busy!"

"Right." Ken put his hand on Sandy's arm. "Let's look over here in this pile of loose stuff," he said in a normally loud voice. Beneath his breath, a moment later when Joe was again shouting at Wright not to tug at any of the roof supports, Ken added, "Play along with this. Of course he's lying. But in the meantime we'll gradually work our way back in there." He jerked his head over his shoulder to indicate the bound man who had been left behind around the corner.

"How about this, Joe?" Rogers was asking desperately a few moments later. "Think we could pull it out from under this pile of dirt?"

"Sure we can!" Wright had rushed to join him. "Give us a hand, Joe."

"It's too close to the pit!" Joe snapped. "Leave it alone-unless you both want to fall in."

There was quiet then for some minutes, except for the sound of feet moving over the rough floor, and the occasional brushing noise of dirt being pushed aside in the search for timber beneath.

"He must have reached the entrance by now," Rogers said finally, breathing heavily. "How long do you think it will take him to set fire to those cars and shut it off?"

“Stop talking! Keep looking!” Joe snapped.

Ken and Sandy were close to the turn into the shaft where the kerosene lantern burned now. They were moving cautiously, flashing their light around as if in a careful search. In another moment they would be able to slip around the corner and race to the bound figure.

Ken knew that if they did actually find a timber that would bridge the chasm, they would announce the fact. But he was convinced that no such timber existed in this part of the mine. Turney would have seen to that.

Ken glanced back over his shoulder. None of the three men was watching them. He gave Sandy's elbow a slight shove, and then they were around the corner and out of sight of Joe and the other two. They were running full tilt, stabbing their light ahead toward the yellow glow of the lantern.

A moment later they were beside the bound man, and Sandy was hacking away at the ankle-binding ropes with his pocketknife.

“Don't try to talk!” Ken whispered swiftly, as he shoved the flashlight into his pocket and set to work on the knots in the rope binding the captive's hands. “We're here to get you out of this-if we can. We're Sandy Allen”-his head indicated Sandy-“and Ken Holt, of the *Brentwood Advance*. You are Harry Land, aren't you?”

The bent head swerved around then and Ken got his first look at a thin face, beaded now with the sweat of pain and effort.

“I'm Land, all right. But how you guessed or how you got in here-?”

“The same way you did.” In half a dozen terse sentences Ken brought Land up to date on the events of the past few hours.

Land interrupted only once, when Ken explained how the telephone conversation had brought Sandy and himself rushing to Wanaka.

“So that's who was calling,” Land murmured. “They were holding a gun on me when the phone rang, but they shoved me into another room right away and I didn't hear what went on.”

“They pretended you were leaving but that Turney managed to call you back,” Ken explained. “It was the big one who talked to me-the one who calls himself Joe. And I fell for everything he said,” he added bitterly. “Hook, line, and sinker.”

“Anybody would,” Land said quietly. “Joe Starret's one of the slickest crooks in the business. So they got you up here. And then what?”

The ropes were almost cut through or untied by the time Ken had told him how they had been maneuvered into the mine.

“Here, I'll do that,” Sandy said, and attacked the last stubborn knot that defied Ken's fingers. “There!” he muttered a second later. “Can



you stand up? Can you walk?"

"I'll manage." Land's jaw was clenched tight as if from a pain more severe than that of long-bound muscles suddenly set in motion.

"You're hurt!" Ken said.

"Not much. Ankle twisted under me when they threw me down."

They helped him to his feet.

"And now-" Ken began. He broke off suddenly as the sound of a familiar high-pitched laugh drifted along the shaft. "Turney's back!"

With Harry Land between them, Ken and Sandy hurried toward the corner, straining to distinguish the panic-stricken words of Rogers and Wright.

Joe's booming voice rose above them. "What do you think you're doing, Turney?"

"Think?" Turney laughed again. "I don't think-I know. I'm going to block off this passage right here, just as an extra precaution. You wondered why I insisted on loading those bags with four cans of kerosene, when you said two would be enough for the job of burning the cars. Now you understand. I need the other two here." The thin voice bounced across the pit and along the shaft on a gleeful bragging note. "So now you can stop your futile search for a plank to serve as a bridge."

"Turney!" Wright screamed. "Listen! Let us out of here and you can name your own price! We never meant to take three-quarters of your loot. You can keep it all!"

"Indeed I shall!" Turney interrupted. "I intended to all along. You thought your blackmail threat alarmed me. It didn't. I knew you'd turn up sooner or later, but I always knew you wouldn't dare tell a new story to the police. They wouldn't suspect me, anyhow. I was in the clear. But they would have held you for perjury."

A faint liquid gurgle could be heard when he paused.

"He's pourin' out the kerosene!" Wright's voice was a loud, terrified whisper.

Ken and Sandy and Land had reached the corner by now, and could see the three men standing on the near edge of the pit. On the far side, for an instant, the pale blob of Turney's face appeared, and then disappeared again behind the bulwark of the landslide.

"No, you were no threat to me at all," Turney went on, as if eager to destroy the men by words before he concluded their physical destruction. "You didn't even know how I'd removed the jewelry from the store. It was only when that insurance investigator came along, and those two young reporters, that I saw I had to get rid of you. They had the one idea that could have put you-and the police-on the right track.

"Not that you could prove anything against me," he went on

quickly. "Nobody could. The post-office record of that package I mailed to myself is destroyed by now. And who could prove I didn't have enough savings to buy the Wanaka Tourist Court Company and hire myself as manager? Oh, no, even with you still alive I'd be safe from prosecution."

"Then why-why are you-?" Pete Wright's voice was a wail.

"True, I'm safe from prosecution," Turney repeated blandly, "but not from suspicion. And I do not choose to live under a cloud of suspicion for the rest of my life. I intend to be free-completely free -to live exactly as I wish. From now on, I can spend my money freely. I can live like a lord!"

Ken, Sandy, and Land had been listening to the gloating speech with tense absorption, their eyes straining ahead to try to catch glimpses of Turney when he occasionally poked his head briefly around the pile of rubble. But they had also seen Joe bring up his gun, holding it close to his body, and aim it directly at the spot where Turney's face appeared now and then.

Suddenly Turney showed himself once more. "That is why I have decided to take this unhappy step," the little gray-haired man said. "I don't enjoy it. But--"

"But I enjoy this!" As Joe spoke, the gun barked.

The shot thundered through the tunnel, filling it with reverberating echoes.

Another shot followed quickly, and then a third.

The air inside the shaft seemed to pulse in heavy waves.

Ken's muscles stiffened, and he could feel Land's arm tense beneath his hand. Instinctively the two boys and the man stepped away from the walls, expecting any moment to be buried beneath their collapse.

And then Turney's thin voice drifted over the black pit. "Too bad, Joe!" he said. He was laughing again. "Your aim is no more accurate than your thinking."

"You'll never get away with this, Turney!" Joe yelled. "Now you won't go to prison for theft! Oh, no! Now you'll go for--"

"I have no intention of going to prison," Turney cut in calmly. "You'll no doubt be missed eventually -all six of you. But will you be traced here-to me? Of course not. I'll even remember to drive your car down into the tunnel, Joe, before I close off the entrance. Intelligent planning-yes, that is my secret!"

Once more he laughed.

"He lit it!" Rogers' terrified scream split the air as a tongue of flame sprang upward on the far side of the pit.

Then all three of the guns barked at once-Rogers', Wright's and Joe's.

The succession of shots rocked the earth underfoot and rumbled

around the walls, echoing and reechoing like thunder.

As the thunder died away, the tongue of flame across the pit seemed to explode into a vast cloud of smoke. An instant later the smoke was billowing out across the chasm, sweeping toward the figures of the three men like a gray sail bellied by the wind.

For a paralyzed moment Ken and Sandy stood unmoving, on either side of Land, as the three men turned and ran toward them. At the men's backs, and stretching forth tentacles to lick at their flying heels, moved the shroudlike pall of menacing smoke.

# CHAPTER XVII

## THE TRAIL OF SMOKE

Suddenly the moving cloud of smoke caught up with the three fleeing men and enveloped them. Instantly they were seized with sharp, spasmodic coughing.

The sound broke the hypnotic spell which had held Ken, Sandy, and Land immobile in the path of the thick oily smoke rolling toward them.

Ken whirled, shoving Sandy and Land ahead of him around the corner and back into the shaft where the kerosene lantern still glowed. Neither he nor Sandy had had time yet to discover whether the tunnel continued on beyond the circle of light cast by the lantern.

"Is this a dead end?" Ken asked Land swiftly.

"I don't know. I couldn't see beyond the light," Land told him.

The still-unexplored stretch of shaft beyond the light was their only chance. Ken already knew that the small tunnel branching off it led back to the shaft they had just left. He grabbed Land's right arm, pulled it across his own shoulders, and said "Come on."

With Land's left arm over Sandy's shoulders they started forward, one thought uppermost in all their minds—to keep ahead of the asphyxiating smoke that was already sending thin tendrils around the corner at their backs.

Once past the yellow circle of lantern light, Ken sent his flash ahead down the shaft. Its floor was scattered with fallen stones, its supports looked as if a breath would knock them down.

The boys were trying to move quickly, but the walls were so close to them on either side that it was a tight squeeze. Ken clamped his elbow to his side and still feared he might accidentally strike a support and bring the ceiling crashing down on their heads.

"I can manage with just one of you," Land said quickly, as if he too had recognized the danger. "Take turns with me, why don't you? The other one go ahead with the light. It'll be quicker."

"Right," Sandy agreed. "You go on, Ken."

Ken didn't argue. Seconds were too precious. He stepped from under Land's arm and moved ahead.

They could still hear the strangled coughing and frantic shouts behind them, but the sounds grew a little fainter as their pace quickened. Only the smoke kept up with them, flowing steadily at their backs, stretching toward them with waving gray arms, even now that they were hurrying more swiftly away from it.

Ken sent the beam of his light sometimes as far ahead as it would

go, sometimes flashed it down and back to light the stumbling feet of Sandy and Land.

The tunnel was narrowing, its ceiling growing lower. Faster, behind them, the smoke came on.

Already they were enveloped in the edges of it, and coughing as their lungs rebelled.

Minutes went by. How many of them Ken didn't even try to guess. He had become a moving machine whose only function was to keep going, to light the way ahead for the two figures behind him.

Once his exploring flash found a small branch tunnel leading off to the right-scarcely larger than an animal's burrow. Ken glanced at it only briefly before he hurried on. They could move more quickly in the shaft they were already following.

"Why don't you two go on?" Land's words were a faint gasp. "Leave me here and--"

"No!" Sandy coughed the word out.

Ken heard them, and knew that Sandy too was nearly exhausted from the burden of Land's weight. Now it was his turn to support the man, and let Sandy go ahead with the light.

But before he could turn and suggest the change he saw that the floor of the tunnel tilted upward a few dozen feet beyond him--rose in a slope that touched the ceiling.

Their way was blocked. The walls and ceiling of the shaft had collapsed into a heap of rubble that completely filled the passage.

Sandy and Land stopped behind him, transfixed as he was by the grim sight.

The smoke came up at their backs, and a long wisp of it, like the feeler of some prehistoric monster, moved up the slope and slid around a boulder just under the jagged ceiling on the right.

Land's eyes were closed and he sagged wearily against Sandy. "So we're blocked after all." His voice was a ragged whisper.

"No!" Sandy protested. "The smoke's getting past that boulder! If I roll it away--Will you be aH right?" He eased himself out from under Land's arm and lowered the man to the floor. "Now, Ken, shine the light up there and I'll climb up."

Slowly, on hands and knees, Sandy started up the slope. Earth and small stones fell away beneath him, and he slid backward a foot for every two feet of progress he made. The shaking of his body, when he coughed, loosened more debris, and Sandy sank elbow-deep into the pile of rubble as he struggled to hold the gain he had made.

Finally, he reached one hand up and touched the boulder he had been aiming at, only to slide several feet backward as the pile sank under the pressure of his knees. Laboriously he regained his position, crept up another foot, and then was able to put his hand firmly on the

large stone. It rocked slightly under his fingers.

"All-right!" A rasping cough separated the two words. "Stand away!"

His smoke-shrouded figure was barely visible to Ken below. Staring up at him through streaming eyes, Ken held his breath. Sandy might succeed in rolling the boulder out of position-but at the same time he might disturb the whole pile of rubble and be lost in its collapse. Ken clenched his teeth to keep himself from shouting to Sandy not to make the attempt. He knew the words would be useless; knew, too, that if they couldn't make their way over the obstacle they would all be lost.

"Here it comes!" A rattle coincided with Sandy's gasp.

Swiftly the rattle grew to a miniature roar, and then the huge boulder was bouncing over the stones to a stop not three feet from where Ken stood.

Swiftly Ken raised his eyes from it to the pile of debris. Sandy's figure seemed only half visible now.

"You all right?" Ken demanded.

"Sure-just widening this opening a little. O.K.," Sandy added after a moment. "Now if you can get the light to me up here, I'll see if it's safe to slide down the other side."

Ken had to climb halfway up the slope before Sandy's reaching fingers could close around the flash held up toward him.

Then Sandy was pointing it through the hole. "Come on," he said, and disappeared through the new opening he had created.

Land was on his feet, unaided, limping over to the foot of the pile. "You go ahead," he told Ken. "I can manage this."

Already halfway up the incline, Ken didn't argue. Carefully he crawled farther, while Sandy held the light slanting down from above to guide him. Ken eased himself through the hole, took the light from Sandy, and held it for Land's guidance.

The man's twisted ankle was no hindrance to a climb on hands and knees. Land reached the top almost as quickly as Ken had done.

By then, Sandy was at the foot of the pile on the far side. Ken tossed him the light and Sandy held it while the others descended in turn.

Covered with gritty dust and dirt, coughing almost constantly now in the midst of the smoke, they started forward again.

Now the uneven rock-strewn floor was obliterated by the haze of smoke. Every step was hazardous. Ken, supporting Land while Sandy led the way, fell to his knees when Land pitched forward into a hole. Ken staggered to his feet and tried to raise Land, but the exhausted man was almost a dead weight.

"Don't wait! Go on!" Land muttered.

"No!" Ken said, as vehemently as Sandy had answered the same

suggestion previously. "Come on. We can still keep going!"

He didn't know how long those words would be true. His own lungs ached painfully; his eyes smarted as if they had been burned.

"Need help?" Sandy's choked voice came from the dim haze of light up ahead.

"No." Land lifted himself up. "We're coming. Thanks," he murmured huskily as Ken again took the heavy arm over his shoulder.

Slowly, step by step, they stumbled on.

And then-as suddenly as if the smoke had been controlled by a valve, and the valve had been abruptly shut off-the suffocating oily cloud disappeared. One moment they were still enveloped in it, gasping for what felt like the last breath they could take. The next moment they had emerged into smokeless air.

Their blurred senses reacted slowly to the change. For a few steps they staggered forward. Sandy stopped first, dropped limply to the ground and gulped in painful lungfuls of the miraculously smoke-free atmosphere. Ken, dazed and weakly astonished, brought Land to a halt beside him. Unable to understand how the transformation had occurred, too grateful to care, they all slumped against the walls. Stupefied, mouths open, they sucked in the life-giving oxygen.

At the end of a long minute their breathing was a little less labored.

Sandy lifted the flashlight and shone it backward. Its beam struck flat against a wall of smoke-a swirling cloud that moved across the tunnel to lose itself in some unseen opening on the right. "I never thought we'd reach the end of it," he croaked.

Suddenly Ken was on his feet again, grabbing the light from Sandy's nerveless fingers. An instant later he was plunging back into the smoke.

"Ken!" As the faint glow that was the smoke-shrouded flashlight faded from Sandy's sight, the redhead too stumbled to his feet. "Come back! What are you-?"

"Wait there!" The insistent note in Ken's half-choked words stopped Sandy in his tracks.

"Where's he gone?"

In the pitch blackness Sandy could hear Land trying to rise as he asked the question.

"I don't know," Sandy told him. "But he-Here he comes!"

The faint glow had reappeared, and a moment later it transformed itself into a sharp yellow beam as Ken emerged from the smoke into the clear passage. "The smoke's following a small branch tunnel," Ken reported. "We've got to follow it too!"

"Go back in there?" Sandy stared at him.

"Of course," Ken said impatiently. "The smoke must be moving

with an air current-a current running from the entrance to an exit some place. If we follow it, we ought to be able to find the exit too. Come on!"

"He's right." Land was erect now, leaning against the wall but looking somehow ready to go on again. "You lead the way. I can manage now if I just keep a hand on your shoulder, I think."

"Let's go." The new life that had been in Land's voice sounded in Sandy's too. They had been struggling blindly through the smoke for so long, in such a desperate effort to escape its choking miasma, that they had had no thoughts to spare for the other, even grimmer problem, of escaping from the abandoned mine itself. Now Ken had suddenly given them hope of doing that. But even as Sandy realized it, he knew too how short-lived that hope might be.

"Let's hurry," he added urgently. "If we have to depend on this moving smoke to lead us out of here, we may not have much longer. When the entrance is blocked-" He didn't bother to finish the sentence.

Together, they plunged back into the smoke, knowing that the air current would exist only so long as it could flow inward from the mine entrance. When Turney blocked off that opening, the air would no longer move and the streaming smoke would settle, destroying their guide line to possible safety.

Faster and faster they moved, stumbling over loose stones they couldn't see in their path, falling over piles of debris and staggering to their feet again, gasping for breath, coughing continually, but somehow going on because they knew they dared not stop.

Their legs trembled with weariness. Even the glow of their flash was feebler now, as the battery weakened. Only the smoke, swirling past them and around them, was as strong as ever.

Suddenly Land's hand tightened on Sandy's shoulder. "Stop!"

Ken, up ahead, heard the single syllable of command too, and halted where he was.

"Listen!" Land said.

With an effort they all restrained coughing for one brief moment.

Ken and Sandy heard it too-the sound of footsteps somewhere behind them.

"Joe Starret and the others," Land gasped. "They're following the smoke too. Come on!"

But before they could take another step forward they found themselves shaking with a sudden turbulence in the air-a pulsing vibration like nothing the boys had ever experienced before.

A second later came a dull reverberation that seemed to shake the whole mountain. All around them small stones clattered to the floor and slid noisily down the walls. A thud that shook the ground near



their feet could only have been caused by a sizable boulder cracking away from the ceiling almost overhead.

"That was it!" Sandy said.

Now, in the glow of the flash, they could see that the smoke was no longer flowing swiftly past them along the shaft. Now it was eddying and wavering in erratic swirls, dipping downward here and there toward the floor.

"Come on!" Ken urged.

Desperately they started forward again, determined to seize what last help the smoke could give them. It was settling now. Before they knew it, it had dropped to shoulder level. Within moments they could breathe almost normally again, but now the realization of that fact carried its own terror. Once the smoke had all been cleared from the tunnel, they would have no clue to the exit it had found for itself-an exit that offered their only chance of leaving the mine alive.

"Faster!" Ken urged, righting himself with an out-flung arm as he tripped over an upthrust rock.

The tunnel turned and twisted. Frantically they rounded bend after bend. Now the smoke was only waist-high, and with each racing second it grew thinner.

And now, behind them, they could clearly hear the thudding feet of Joe Starret and Rogers and Wright.

"Faster!" Ken gasped again, hardly aware that he spoke.

The smoke sank to a wispy foot-high mist lying along the floor-sank still lower until it was eddying around their ankles.

Ken flashed the light ahead and caught his breath in an agonized gasp. The floor of the shaft only fifteen feet beyond his feet was entirely clear of smoke.

"Is it gone?" Sandy asked, caroming into him.

Ken nodded. "We'll just have to keep on following the tunnel," he gasped. "Maybe-No! Look!" He was pointing the light at a three-foot hole in the right wall of the shaft. It was not a branch tunnel. Like a similar hole they had passed once before, it looked more like a large animal's burrow than a mine shaft. "It must be an air vent!" Ken barely breathed the words.

The smoke had sped past that other small hole they had seen. That vent-if that's what it was-must have been blocked. But slender wisps of smoke were being sucked into this small black cavity.

Ken dropped to his knees in front of it, thrust his head and shoulders inside, and shone his light forward.

"I think it's our only chance," he said, backing partially out again. "Anyway, it's open for as far as I can see."

"Let's take it!" Land said quickly. "You go first. You're the thinnest one of us."

“You next,” Sandy said to Land. “I’ll come behind you.”

Ken nodded and turned back again to start crawling into the small cramped tunnel which sloped gently upward.

“Easy!” Ken had to caution a few moments later. “It turns here-it’ll be a tight fit.” It was tight even for him. When he had eased his way around the curve, he squeezed against one side wall and reached a hand back to help pull Land through.

The man’s shoulders jammed against the damp walls.

“Push his feet!” Ken gasped to Sandy.

Sandy braced his left shoulder against the soles of Land’s shoes and shoved. His own feet skidded backward.

“Again!” Ken urged.

Sandy threw his whole weight into another shove, while Ken clutched the front of Land’s coat in his hand and pulled.

The broad shoulders jerked forward six inches.

Ken toppled forward onto his face. But Land had passed the narrowest part of the curve.

“O.K.!” the man whispered hoarsely. “I can make it now.”

“And I can get through if you can,” Sandy was muttering, when a sudden glow of light from the rear caused him to twist his head quickly backward. “They’re right behind us! Hurry!”

Sandy, Ken, and Land had only one purpose just then: to escape from the mine. The men behind them shared that lifesaving goal with their own intensity. But those men almost certainly had another purpose as well. Escape from the mine would not mean freedom for them if Land and the two boys were still alive to tell their stories to the world.

Ken scrambled forward. Land was close at his heels. At their rear they could hear Sandy’s coat rip, and his head crack sharply against a rock, as he drove himself through the narrow neck of the curve. Farther behind, they could hear the scrabbling of other hands and feet.

Now the little tunnel was angling so steeply upward that it could be negotiated only inches at a time, and only two feet of space separated the rock-streaked earth of floor and ceiling.

A boulder the size of a basketball halted Ken’s progress momentarily. Laboriously he crawled over it.

“Watch it here-rock!” he warned the others.

The bellow and the upward-slanting beam of light burst on their senses an instant later.

“There they are!” Joe Starret’s boom echoed hollowly in the confined space. “You up there! Stop-or I’ll shoot!”

Sandy looked back. The glow of a flashlight showed around the curve he himself had just passed. No gun was in sight beside it. Joe

Starret, too, was undoubtedly having difficulty in rounding that narrow bend.

But from the bend on, the low tunnel ran straight. When Starret got his gun aimed upward, he wouldn't miss. It would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE TRICK THAT DIDN'T WORK

Sandy was driving forward against Land's feet. "Go on!" he breathed.

The three crouched figures inched forward once more, hauling themselves up the slope at their desperate crawling pace.

Sandy banged into the boulder Ken had warned him of, but which he had since forgotten. He arced his big body to slither over it.

This whole frantic effort was useless, he told himself. Joe Starret's bullet could carry twenty feet as well as ten-forty feet as well as twenty. Ken and he had thought they were trapped when they first walked into the mine. But only now was the trap about to snap shut over them forever.

Suddenly Sandy found that he was no longer trying to pass the stone. Instead, he was clutching at it, trying to rock it out of the earth in which it was embedded.

"Land!" he panted. "Push the rock behind you-with your feet! Push!"

His hands were still clamped around the stone when Land's feet drove against them, crushing the fingers against the hard, rough surface. Sandy scarcely noticed the pain. "Push! Again!"

The rock moved. It tore loose, rolling backward toward the wall of Sandy's body. Digging his toes into the ground, and pushing his torso upward by planting his hands flat and straightening his elbows, Sandy let it roll beneath him until it rested against his insteps.

At any instant he expected a shot from the rear.

But one more second was all he needed now.

Swiftly he dropped to one knee, brought his right foot around the rock until his sole was against it. Then he thrust backward at the boulder with all his remaining strength.

In the light of Starret's torch he could see the rock hurtling down the incline, picking up speed until it was a cannonading mass of destructive power.

Sandy watched it go-and suddenly the fear and vengeful hatred he had felt toward the men below him in the tunnel gave way to a horrified realization of the deadliness of the missile he had sent against them.

"Look out below!" he shouted. "Get back!"

A face appeared beside the glowing flashlight as Sandy yelled. Its mouth gaped in terror. A scream was issuing from the mouth when, like a jack-in-the-box in reverse, the face disappeared again.

The scream was still filling the narrow shaft when the rock slammed into the neck of the bend and stuck there, fast. The thud of the impact shook the earth under Sandy's body.

"Sandy!" Ken was trying to thrust his own flashlight backward, past himself and Land. "What-?"

"I've stopped them-for a minute," Sandy said faintly. "Get moving! Fast!"

Ken didn't question him further. Silently he clawed his way upward, ignoring the stones his scrabbling hands and feet set in motion.

For another twenty feet the tunnel ran straight. Then it turned sharply to the left. The dying glimmer of the flash in Ken's hand barely showed him the curve's contour.

"Bend here!" He waited until he had felt his way around it, and then breathed, "O.K. Big enough. Keep coming."

Sandy looked back once more, when he sensed the curving wall around which he was about to crawl. There was a light showing below him again, and dimly he could see two hands curled around the boulder, trying to clear it away from the passage it still blocked.

The stone was not immovable. Sandy had proved that himself, with Land's help. The narrow bend would soon be open again.

Up ahead, straining now for every breath, Ken was fighting his way up the shaft that angled more steeply with each foot he traversed.

Vaguely he wondered why the rocky floor beneath his hands felt damper than it had some moments ago. Then, unexpectedly, his clawing fingers slid from hard stone to softer earth. His thumb caught in a tough tendril and he jerked it loose before he realized what it had been: a root!

Unbelievably he clutched at the walls pressing him in on either side. They were solid earth-earth interwoven with a thousand sinewy strands.

Slowly, hardly daring to trust the hope that had suddenly come alive in him, Ken lifted his head to look upward.

What he saw was a rough circle not five feet above him, its edge feathered by a gently waving fringe, its center pricked by points of diamond-yellow light.

"What's wrong?" Sandy's desperate whisper sounded from behind. "Can't you go on?"

"Grass! Stars!" Ken answered him incoherently. "We made it!" And then he was struggling up through the last, scant yards of root-choked tunnel. For a split second, when his head broke free into the clear sweet-scented night air, he paused long enough to gulp down a single draught of it. Then he scrambled over the edge into freedom, and reached back to haul up Land and then Sandy.

For a long moment, when all three of them were together on the open hillside, they stared straight up in still-unbelieving wonder at the starbright sky overhead. The immensity of it was overpowering after the dungeonlike closeness of the mine. Their escape from that underground prison was like waking from a nightmare. Ken closed his fingers around a tuft of dew-wet grass to convince himself that the escape itself was not a dream.

Sandy's first words snapped him back to reality.

"They're still coming!" Sandy said urgently. "Joe and the others. That stone I rolled back didn't stop them for good."

"We don't want to stop them-now," Land said. "Let's have them out here." They were hearing his normally authoritative voice for the first time, seeing his face more clearly in the faint starshine than they had seen it before. Land was grinning. "After what we've been through-after the rescue performance you've just put on for my benefit-this will be easy. All we need is a couple of rocks." He bent down and picked one up as he spoke. "Choose your weapons, gentlemen. And give me the light and let me stand here by the exit. You two get back out of the line of fire for a change."

Land moved several steps to take up a position on the slope just above the opening, and motioned Ken and Sandy to station themselves on either side of him. Then he pointed the faintly glimmering flashlight so that it illuminated the tunnel exit beneath his feet.

"Joe!" he called out. "Do you hear me? Your little game is up, Starret. Pass out your guns, one at a time and butt first. Put them on the grass."

An unintelligible murmur rumbled somewhere beneath their feet.

"Make it fast, Joe. And don't try any tricks!" Land snapped. "They wouldn't do you any good. Put out the guns or you won't get out of there yourself. Do you understand?"

Again the unintelligible murmur sounded. Several long seconds ticked by. And then at last a gun appeared through the opening. Three pairs of eyes watched tensely. It was butt first, and a moment later it lay harmlessly on the grass.

"O.K.," Land called. With a single long, limping stride he was close enough to retrieve it, and he held it pointed at the opening. "Now the other two." A moment later he had a weapon in each pocket.

"All right, Starret," Land said. "Now we'll let you out of there."

Dirt-grimed and filthy, Joe Starret's burly figure crawled painfully through the hole.

"On your feet!" Land commanded him. "And put up your hands."

The man's breath was coming in difficult gasps. He seemed barely able to push himself up from his knees. When he raised his arms they hung slack and powerless, hands no higher than his shoulders.

Land gestured to Sandy. "Take off his belt and use it to tie his hands. That's right," Land added, when Sandy had unbuckled and pulled off the belt. "You can put your hands down now, Joe-wrists crossed and behind your back." He raised his voice slightly to call down the tunnel. "Just relax, you two. We'll let you out in a minute."

Joe was recovering his breath. There was an echo of the old booming note in his voice when he spoke, but he kept his eyes on the gun in Land's hand, and the feebleness of his words reflected his awareness of their suddenly reversed positions. "I suppose you think you're pretty smart, don't you?"

"Not very," Land said, grinning. "Not as smart as I am lucky. All right, Joe. Stand aside." Sandy had completed the job of securing the man's hands. "Now we'll let your two friends join you."

Five minutes later Rogers and Wright, glaring more sullenly at Starret than at their captors, were also standing exhausted on the hillside with their hands fastened at their backs.

"Which way to the highway, do you suppose?" Land asked the boys.

"Right over that crest, I think. Wait a minute." Sandy started quickly up the slope that rose over their heads.

His usually acute sense of direction hadn't failed him. The abandoned mine tunnel had brought them clear through the mountain, to emerge on its far side a few minutes' steep climb below the rounded peak. From where Sandy stood he could see the highway below him. A splash of bright neon lights, approximately half a mile to his left, showed the location of the big diner opposite the Wanaka Motor Court. There would be a phone in the diner.

"Come on!" he called back down to the others.

Ken took the lead, with a still-bright flashlight he had found in Starret's pocket. Land limped behind, a gun in each hand.

They didn't need the diner's public telephone after all. As they pushed through the bushes a few feet from the highway, Sandy suddenly pointed, "Look! State Police cars at Turney's! How could they have got here so fast? Who knew-?"

"Let's go find out!" Despite his own limp, Land forced the angry, exhausted men ahead of him to quicken their pace. Soon they were all approaching the office of the motel, its windows lighted as Ken and Sandy had first seen them earlier that night.

Ken, in the lead, caught the sound of a familiar high-pitched voice through an open window. Swiftly he held up his hand to warn the others to approach in silence, and drew near enough to look through the tilted blinds at the scene taking place within. Turney himself was there, looking small and frail. Around him, in attitudes of bewildered sympathy, stood several stalwart state troopers.

“Mr. Land tried to argue with them,” Turney was saying. “He knew I was innocent, of course-told them himself that he’d investigated me thoroughly. But Rogers and Wright and their dreadful friend-Joe, he called himself-kept insisting I had what they called the loot,’ and that I must turn it over to them. Oh, it was dreadful-dreadful! They tied Land up first and took him away. I don’t know where. Then they tied me up and left me here helpless! I had to struggle for three hours to free myself so that I could call you.”

Ken glanced swiftly over his shoulder. On the face of Starret and Rogers and Wright utter amazement struggled with speechless rage. Sandy’s eyes were blank with astonishment. Only Land looked unsurprised, even faintly amused.

“Genius!” he said softly, shaking his head. “The man’s a genius!”

“Now tell us again, Mr. Turney,” one of the troopers was saying respectfully, “about the phone call you said came in after you were tied up.”

“Yes, yes.” Turney leaned forward. “I think it was Rogers who answered, pretending to be me. Then he turned it over to Joe, who said he was Mr. Land. I couldn’t follow the conversation. I was so upset and frightened. But later I heard them talking about ‘a couple of busybodies’ and saying they’d take care of them the way they were going to take care of Land. Of course I thought they were going to kill me,” he added, shivering realistically. “I was so relieved when they finally left me-but so afraid I wouldn’t be able to get help before they returned. *Do you think they’ll come back, Officer? Do you?*”

“That’s our cue,” Land said quietly. “Let’s go in.”

Ken moved the few steps to the door and reached for the knob. It turned under his hand as the others came up behind him. He pushed it open and Land thrust the three bound men into the room.

“Turney!” Joe Starret bellowed. “You dirty double-crossing-!”

Ken could see Turney jerk around and half rise out of his chair. The man’s jaw dropped. His face turned a sickly yellow.

And then he was on his feet and bounding like a frightened rabbit toward the back door.

Ken and Sandy, unlike the amazed officers, had expected the move. They were after him instantly. Sandy’s powerful arms lifted the slight figure off the floor as Turney’s hand grabbed for the knob. Turney was screaming. He struggled frantically, like a trapped animal, but Sandy held him fast.

“Thanks-again.” Land was grinning. “Officers,” he went on, raising his voice over the clamor of Turney’s hysteria, “we know you’ve just been listening to a rather remarkable story. Now we want to tell you another one-more remarkable still. But first, if you happen to have four pairs of handcuffs with you, I think it would reduce the



confusion.”

Ken took another bite of sandwich and another swallow of milk from the glass standing on his desk. Wearily he grinned at the faces staring into his-at Pop and Mom Allen, sitting close together, at Bert perched on his own desk, Maribelle at hers, and Dewald at Sandy’s.

The hands on the *Advance* office clock pointed to three. Almost twelve hours had passed since he and Sandy and Land had crawled out of the air-vent shaft of the old mine at Wanaka-almost nine hours since they had finished telling their story to the State Police.

They had called home as soon as Turney’s hysteria had quieted into sullen silence, to report triumphantly that Christopher Bell was in the clear. And after the session with the police, Ken had put through a call to Global News in New York to dictate a brief account of the long-delayed solution to the Balfour theft.

Land had called New York too, a little later, to report to his office that over a hundred and fifty thousand dollars’ worth of jewels had been recovered from a trunk in the cellar beneath the motor-court office.

Afterward, Land had accompanied the boys on the train as far as Trenton, where Bert had driven to meet them.

“You’ll be hearing from me,” Land had said, as the train pulled out of the Trenton station to continue on its way to New York.

“I still don’t understand how Joe Starret got into the act,” Bert said.

“Oh.” Ken blinked. “Thought I’d told you that. Rogers and Wright had known him for years-had asked him to keep an eye on Turney while they were in jail, so they’d know where to find him as soon as they came out.”

“Now that’s enough, Bert,” Mom said briskly. “These boys have got to get home and get some rest. Where’s Sandy?”

“Right here.” Sandy answered her, coming through the doorway at the rear of the office. “Not too good,” he said to Ken, as he laid three damp pictures in front of his father. “But not too bad considering that I had to use Turney’s old camera.”

Pop was studying the prints. One showed the four handcuffed captives in Turney’s office. Another pictured Land and two police officers with the trunk containing the recovered jewelry. The third showed the entrance to the mine, completely clogged with the rubble that had choked it off when the roof supports had burned through.

Mom shuddered. “Turney can’t be sane.”

“I don’t think he is, Mom,” Ken agreed. “Once he got the idea that Chris was taking his place-that Balfour wanted to get rid of him, which wasn’t true, of course-I think he brooded over it so much that it warped his mind. But he’s brilliant,” Ken added. “He could work out a

plan in a split second, the way he did that night of the robbery when he suddenly saw a chance to revenge himself on Balfour and Chris both. Or he could change his plans instantly, as he did when he learned that Land and we had tumbled to his secret. Up to that minute he'd just laughed at the three crooks. But then he knew he had to get rid of all of us, and he nearly figured out the perfect way to do it."

Dewald shook his head. "That story he concocted for the State Police was certainly a brilliant bit of improvising."

"And he could make long-range plans and sit them out too," Sandy said. "Look at the way he stuck at the motel, knowing all the time he could be living like a lord on the stuff he stole, until Wright and Rogers got out of jail and he could make sure he was absolutely safe. He'd only used a little of it, you know. Just pried a few stones out of their settings for enough money to set up that dummy motor-court corporation."

Ken nodded agreement. He couldn't speak. He was yawning.

Mom stood up. "Come along home," she said sternly to Ken. "You too, Sandy. I know Chris Bell wants to see you, but he'll understand that you've got to have some rest first."

"And he won't vanish this time," Bert added. "He'll be right in his room waiting for you."

Dewald stood up too. "You've done a remarkable job, boys," he said. "But I seem to remember you saying you'd be careful when you went to Hilldale. You slipped up a little bit on that part of the agreement, didn't you?"

Sandy looked uncomfortable. "We slipped up on practically everything," he muttered. "But we're paying for it-and Bert's the one who comes out best on the deal. You promised to wash our car every Saturday for a year," he reminded his brother, "and now you'll get out of it because we have no car." He tried to grin over the last words, but he turned his head carefully away from the print showing the debris-buried mine entrance behind which the red convertible lay in ruins.

"Of course you've got a car!" Bert said gruffly. "You've got mine. It may not be red, but--"

"Don't be a lunkhead!" Sandy snapped. "We're not going to--"

The rest of his words were drowned by the ringing of the phone. Pop picked it up.

Mom seized the moment to prod the boys toward the door, but they resisted her when they heard Pop say, "Land? ... How are you?"

In silence they waited for him to finish the conversation, unable to tell from Pop's monosyllabic replies what the insurance investigator was saying.

When Pop put down the phone he reached deliberately for his pipe and began to stuff it with tobacco.

“Well?” Mom asked tartly.

“That was Land,” Pop told her.

“No!” Maribelle stared at him in mock amazement. “Oh, go on,” she said impatiently. “What was it about?”

“About that thousand-dollar reward for Chris Bell’s capture,” Pop said, grinning.

“But surely they don’t want Chris any longer!” Bert protested.

“True,” Pop admitted. “In fact, the insurance company has withdrawn the offer. But they’ve replaced it with the offer of a new car for you two” -he grinned suddenly at Ken and Sandy-“plus new luggage and whatever else you lost.”

Ken sat down limply in the nearest chair.

“Wow!” Sandy said. “But that means-why all my camera stuff was in the car!”

“Land knows that.” Pop nodded complacently. “He said if you’d let him have a list of the equipment, he’d bring it out with him tomorrow when he drives your new red convertible to Brentwood.”

“Wow!” Sandy repeated, louder than before. Suddenly he was jerking open a desk drawer and grabbing for paper and pencil. “Ah, new equipment! Out of my way, everybody, I’ve got important work to do!” He began to scribble at top speed.

Mom sat down again resignedly. “I’ll give you exactly ten minutes, Sandy, and then you are both coming home. I mean it now!”

“What’s the rush, Mom?” Ken asked her, grinning. “We’ve got nothing to do for a whole year now, except watch Bert wash our car.”

“That’s right,” Sandy agreed, not looking up from his racing pencil. “From now on, we’ll get plenty of rest.”

At the moment there seemed no reason why the glib prophecy shouldn’t come true. But at the moment, of course, neither Ken nor Sandy knew just how soon they would find themselves involved in *The Mystery of the Shattered Glass*.

THE END

THE MYSTERY OF THE VANISHING MAGICIAN

A KEN HOLT Mystery, No. 12

By Bruce Campbell